

# RETURN OF AN EXILE: SEPTEMBER 1991

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[In December 1973 I left South Africa on an exit permit after completing a prison sentence of nine years. Return was not permitted, but following announcements that exiles would be allowed to return, a visa was requested. This was granted but only for two months, with no right to reentry. In September 1991 I visited South Africa. There I talked to academics, students, trade unionists and political activists, to friends and chance contacts, and followed the local press, TV and radio programmes. I have not named my informants or provided details of some of these discussions lest the persons concerned are embarrassed by such disclosures, but I use the information they kindly provided in writing this account. Without claiming to have seen more than a small part of the country, this essay (written in November 1991) is an account of what events two years after the unbanning of proscribed organizations].

## A Changed Society?

I was asked what I thought about the changes occurring in South Africa after I had been in the country for six hours. The same question was asked repeatedly during my six weeks stay. Some used this approach as a step towards starting a conversation, but in many cases there was a desire to probe below the surface, to seek an answer to what was happening. There was a mixture of optimism and also of fear; of hope that at last there might be meaningful change, but also doubt whether the political organizations had the will or the desire to transform the country.

I could not answer the questions posed so starkly at first but as the days passed I grew more confident of my replies. I was asked to talk on the subject on several of the campuses I visited: there was change, I said, but there was certainly no transformation. But, as obvious as that observation was, I was not yet able to get to grips with past theories about the process of change in South Africa, so many of which had been nullified by the events of the past two years. Gone at a stroke was the Stalinist claim that South Africa was an example of 'Colonialism of a Special Type' (or CST as its advocates called it. Equally obvious was the demise of the interpretation the South African Trotskyists had given to the theory of 'permanent revolution'.<sup>1</sup> The contention that only the working class, in its struggle against capitalism, would sweep away segregation (or *apartheid*) was obviously untenable: equally untenable, in view of recent events, was the contention that the central issue in the country was the land question. Theory, as interpreted and espoused by several political groups, had been held up to the harsh reality of events and had been found wanting. What then was the socialist answer to be?

## Change without Transformation

In his novel *The Leopard*, set in Sicily when Garibaldi's troops seemed about to sweep away the feudal past and unify Italy, Giuseppe di Lampedusa had the local feudal lord advise his retinue that: 'For things to remain the same, things must change'. This piece of political wisdom has still to be absorbed by political analysts



who fail to understand the adaptability of the ruling classes when they can find no other way out of their difficulties. Changes might not be welcome to the governments of the day — smug in their belief that 'there is no alternative' — but ultimately they do find a way out when faced with the collapse of the system they control. Then change becomes the order of the day, provided only that the basic elements of the society they control can be preserved.

There are obvious changes in South Africa, some of them quite radical. The external signs of apartheid have gone — and the forced separation of peoples has vanished. The separate queues at official institutions, the exclusion of blacks (and this means people once classified as Indians or Asians, Coloureds and Africans) from places of leisure or entertainment, the tight residential exclusiveness, have gone or been altered significantly. Many practices, once illegal and subject to imprisonment, are now tolerated if not approved. People of different colour and ethnicity can now walk together unhindered, frequent cafes and theatres, bathe on the same seafront; sit together at lecture benches in the universities. Couples of mixed ethnicity live together legally. Black security guards, rifles over shoulder, or guns in holster, are everywhere — in the army, the police force or privately employed. Occupations, once confined to whites under job reservation, are now open to all — from telephonists to air hostesses, shop assistants, factory operatives, and even foremen and some managers. In fact, from one vantage point, the country is almost 'normal'. Almost, but not quite.

The open colour bar has gone, but has been replaced by a poverty line that is not very distant from the colour line that once controlled South African life. Beaches are no longer officially segregated, but patrons at some resorts must now pay an entrance fee — and that keeps out most 'uppity' blacks; some schools, particularly the private schools, are open, but formerly white government schools have quotas for black enrolment. However, most schools are situated in the townships, and those are segregated in line with the overall housing in the country. In fact, except for the privileged few, and that includes some professional men, business men and politicians, blacks still live in the old townships — if they are fortunate. Some people do have amenities like electricity, or even water-borne sewage. Most still use candle-light and outdoor bucket latrines. Others live in shantytowns that proliferate in the towns. It is said that there are some six million without houses in the towns and several housing schemes that are underway are in fact replications of the old segregated locations with site-and-service structures. That is, shacks built in districts in which standpipe water and bucket latrines are provided. And they still pack into overcrowded trains to get to and from work, if they can find jobs

Finding employment is a job in itself. Few blacks have qualifications for skilled or even semiskilled work, most are entirely unskilled. In a country in which the number of unemployed is anything from 5.5–8 million (and there are no accurate statistics), this leaves large numbers destitute. The unemployed obviously fill the shantytowns, but many with work remain without houses.

The traveller who dares wander out of the white suburbs in Johannesburg — those fortified areas where houses have high walls, burglar-proofed windows and doors, and electronic alarms — will soon come across custombuilt slum areas.



Yet, let it be repeated. This is a great change from the regime of yesteryear. Even the grimmest remains of segregation have softened at the edges. And for the richer blacks there are new privileges and new comforts. One report has it that the highest concentration of black servants is no longer in the white suburbs, but in the wealthier regions of black townships. Without the new black petty bourgeoisie, the unemployment among servants would be truly alarming.

This is change, and the change is noticeable. The former lily-white centres of big towns, and Johannesburg is probably the biggest, are now filled with black stall holders, black vendors and black customers, where once the whites swept all before them. Swept, that is, all but the plastic and paper rubbish before them. Now the dirt piles up to show that there are new occupants and that there is little money for the cleaners who once kept the streets clean for the whites who patronised those shops. Furthermore the buses that once plied between the town centre and the townships have disappeared. In their place stands rows of taxis, each one of which takes ten or more commuters, each competing for custom. Big business has moved in and the intense rivalry has produced open warfare: with taxis being put to the torch or, if less lucky, destroyed in a hail of gunshot. But then, as champions of the free market should note: progress through the market does have its 'ups and downs'.

### **The roots of despair — and of fury**

The sights, smells and sounds are the first indications of change in South Africa. But obviously these changes are relative and many of the most obnoxious features of the 'old regime' still survive. The shantytowns are the worst. The townships, the wealthier regions notwithstanding, are next. And in gradations, the suburbs get cleaner as the wealthier areas are reached. In Zimbabwe, where the word township is no longer acceptable under Robert Mugabe, the word is no longer used: these slum areas are now designated 'high density' as distinct from 'low density' (for the select white suburbs). South Africa has not yet altered sufficiently for the verbal upgrading of townships to 'high density areas'.

Amenities in the townships are sparse or non-existent. Housing has improved only marginally, only a few main roads are tarred; electricity where provided, is often disconnected because payments are behindhand. The schools in the townships, where they operate at all, are as disreputable as the areas in which they stand. The buildings are unsuitable for teaching, the toilet facilities are barely usable, and the classrooms are grossly overcrowded. However the people have in some regions spilt out of the townships into areas that are described as 'grey'. That is, some of the once white suburbs have now been taken over by peoples of all ethnic groups. For some, this has led to a share of the facilities once available only to whites: for others it has only meant a move to new degrading conditions, to overcrowded buildings and outhouses, vacated by those whites who would no longer live in such dilapidated areas. Ethnicity is no longer the sole criterion for privilege. The country is approaching the Brazilian model where colour is less significant than the size of the purse. As is said in that country: the rich, no matter what the colour of the skin, are obviously 'white', the poor are even more obviously 'black'.

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However, even this is only part of the story and does not reflect conditions in the rural areas. Large parts of the country have now suffered several years of drought. Many white farmers have been driven to bankruptcy and some have been forced to sell their land. They usually find the means to survive: their onetime black farmhands are destitute and starving. Some white farmers even get loans — if they belong to the rightwing political groups. In the black rural 'homelands' of the Transkei and Ciskei, the fields are parched, the livestock decimated and the crops destroyed. These people get no loans and have no obvious means of survival. Furthermore, where once the black rural population could offer some shelter or support for the townsfolk, however limited, that buffer has disappeared. Neither rural nor urban poor can hope for succour from their kinsmen.

Despite all the changes, the Bantustans still exist. They still have a nominal independence, with a homemade officialdom and bureaucracy, police force and army. These employees still draw their fat salaries, and in most cases, act as satraps of the central government. In a few exceptional cases the governments of the day seem to exercise some care for their populations. In general, however, the Bantustan leaders form the ancillary force behind which the government still manipulates power. As every observer is fully aware, after the disclosure of government funding to the KwaZulu Inkatha Freedom Party, the Bantustans provide launching-pads for the destabilisation of the country.

### **Crime, Murder and Gang-Warfare**

The daily (English medium) press in South Africa is both parochial and trivialising. It offers its readers a diet of sex, scandal and crime — and tucked away, usually in its inner pages, there are some references to affairs abroad. The newspapers are also provincially focused, reflecting the historical differences in a country where unity has been honoured in the breach. Events in Natal, say, important as they might be for noting trends in the country, are not necessarily reported in other provinces. However, this does not seem to bother the average reader. The sports news, and all the juicier bits of scandal, receive national coverage.

At first glance it is possible to believe, in the same way as the yellow press everywhere, that sex and crime get the main headlines because it is these stories that are the mainstay of the commercial press. In fact, much of the criminal activity in the country is underreported. The activities of marauding vigilante gangs, the warring taxi-companies, the arson and murder in the townships, the hijacking of cars (which requires passengers in moving cars to keep their doors locked), the burglaries, muggings and rapes, are only covered when they are more than usually sensational.

Some of these nefarious activities are ascribable to criminal gangs, and social conditions in the townships makes some of this explicable. The misery of people who drifted into the towns without any hope of homes or jobs, the wide-spread unemployment and the social dislocation in the townships, must be added to the climate of lawlessness after years of revolt, and of contempt for the police and the army. This is the road to nihilism. What else can be expected of a generation, with little formal education after years of school boycotts, with no hope of securing



employment or of occupying houses by legal means. Youth with this background have terrorised whole communities (including the necklacing of opponents), or been guilty of mindless gang activity.

Yet this is a smaller part of the terror that has spread through the black communities. The mayhem that dominates so many of the townships is masterminded by the state. It repeats the terror unleashed previously on the populations of Namibia and the states bordering South Africa and, more particularly, of the gangsters who lead Renamo in Mozambique. The deliberate destabilisation programme that the South African state orchestrated for so many years beyond its borders has turned inwards. The armed thugs who rampage through the trains killing at random, the sharpshooters who pick out political leaders, or the men who toss grenades into political gatherings, are part of a vast plot to deflect political energy and bring the political parties into disrepute. These acts are also the fruits of dehumanizing segregation: *the blacks who were recruited into the armed forces of the state have proved to be the most ruthless killers in the country.*

The actions of the groups that perpetrate these terrorist acts, whether co-ordinated or not, have been perfected by the internal security apparatus of the state. There are times when it manipulates the antagonism between political groups to its own end, using, for example, the Inkatha Freedom Party, in its attacks on the ANC, while not hesitating, when convenient, to mount attacks on Inkatha members in acts of political provocation. Using the divisions inside the communities, the state has revived its former 'Total Strategy' (described in *Searchlight South Africa*, No 2), using its institutions of control and destruction to undermine its political opponents. Just prior to my arrival in South Africa it was estimated that in the 12 months till the end of June 1991 3,180 people died, 6,855 were injured (some seriously), and 8,211 persons arrested in politically motivated clashes.<sup>2</sup> There was no indication throughout my stay that the level of violence had abated.

Mingled with the stories of township brutality, and of marauding killers on commuter trains, the newspapers reported clashes between members of the ANC and Inkatha. There were photographs of hostel dwellers carrying so-called 'cultural' weapons as they marched down the township streets, and counter pictures of ANC gatherings. But there was nothing to suggest that either party was involved in the shoot-ups, or in fact with the random killings: of grenades tossed into gatherings, or of the shooting of leaders of Civic Associations, or indeed of the crowd that gathered at funerals of those shot down. There were also disclosures of *koevoet* troops ('crowbar' troops — trained by the South African army to shoot down members of Swapo in Namibia before it achieved political independence) encamped in the Northern Transvaal, and there were disclosures of covert action by special squads attached to the police or the army. It was these men, it was suggested, who were behind the spate of township killings. Although this was not definitely established, for lack of direct proof, this was the view accepted in movements opposed to de Klerk's government, and responsibility was laid at the door of the security apparatus for the killings.

It was against this background of township mayhem that a meeting to sign a 'Peace Accord' was announced. After three days of meetings an accord was



signed. From the outset there appeared to be problems. Members of Inkatha, all clutching their 'cultural' weapons, filled the street outside the meeting and gave no appearance of wanting peace or the accord. Then it was leaked to the press that Chief Buthelezi, the head of the KwaZulu government and leader of Inkatha, had to be cajoled to appear at the signing ceremony. Cars were rushed to Natal to persuade the leader to come — and he was obviously a reluctant signatory. Several days later an 'explanation' was offered: Chief Buthelezi had mislaid his glasses and had first to acquire new ones. I was told that what was not leaked was the fact that Mr Mandela also was a reluctant signatory. He said that he had a previous engagement and had to be persuaded that signing the accord required that this be given priority. Or did he know that the accord was meaningless and sought a way out?

The question of Inkatha members carrying 'cultural' weapons was also discussed at the meeting. First the government spokesmen claimed that the weapons could not be banned by regulation but had to wait for the next parliamentary session when legislation could be tabled. Only investigation by Cosatu delegates showed that this was not true — after which, it appears, the government declared that they could not ban Inkatha followers carrying weapons while the ANC refused to disband its armed force: Umkhonto we Sizwe. On that issue the discussion on weaponry was blocked.

In terms of the Accord a set of supervisory bodies were to be established to bring peace to the townships. This would be a slow process and in the interim period there were appeals for peace in the townships. Few people with whom I talked believed this would work, and indeed the killings continued as before. There were no obvious calls for political work in the townships to stop the violence, no signs of work by the political groups to persuade the communities to end the conflicts, and no evidence that people in the communities were being taught how to protect each other. Little could be expected from Inkatha, but the ANC and with it Cosatu and the SACP have not been conspicuous in organizing action in the communities. All initiative seems to have been surrendered after a miserable piece of paper was signed.

The meeting to draft a Peace Accord is significant, not in what it achieved, but in the pattern that has emerged over the months. The leadership has set itself the task of negotiating (on which, more below). In the process it has failed to consult with the membership, has ignored the need to explain what is happening to the people who support the organisation, and have continued with a process that it has appropriated to itself.<sup>3</sup> Nor have any of the other organizations taken up the issue, instructed its members on what to do when confronted by killers (or hemmed in by police). While the leadership directs itself to talks and negotiations it has elected to ignore its constituency. And when, ultimately, just before I returned to London, commuters on a train disarmed two members of a gang that was killing passengers indiscriminately, their action was spontaneous and surprised the ANC as much as it surprised the public at large.



## **The Conference on Marxism**

A conference on Marxism in South Africa was mooted over a year ago by the convenors of the Marxist Theory Seminar that was inaugurated in August 1988 at the University of the Western Cape. Originally conducted by a small group of lecturers and students, the meetings had grown in size and were attended at times by audiences of 200–300. The response to the seminar led to a suggestion that a Conference on Marxism be convened in September 1991. Trade unions, socialist groups (including the Communist Party), university departments and all interested persons were invited to attend. It was the prospect of attending this conference that decided the date of my visit to South Africa.

The granting of a visa was delayed and I had almost given up hope of making the trip when it finally arrived. With less than a fortnight to arrange my departure and write a paper, I was asked to open the proceedings, because Angela Davis, leading member of the US Communist Party, who had agreed to speak, suddenly found that she would not be in Cape Town on the day of the opening. There was no satisfactory explanation for her non-attendance, nor was any excuse provided for the absence of the entire leadership of the SACP. The executive of the SACP had ignored all notifications about the convening of the conference, despite the fact that the venue (the University of the Western Cape) was said to be a stronghold of the ANC and of the SACP. Perhaps it was also not accidental that no leading members of the ANC (many of whom are known to be in the SACP), or the PAC and Azapo, (many of whom also claim to be Marxists) attended the conference. Pallo Jordan, who writes as a Marxist, and is a leading member of the ANC, did submit the draft outline of a paper but, he too, claimed that illness in his family demanded that he be elsewhere.

The absence of the SACP leadership was no loss. Their claims to Marxism were never creditable and, in the light of the confusion over events in Moscow, it is doubtful whether they could have answered any of the criticism that was levelled against the communists in the USSR, or contributed to the discussions in any meaningful way. What was significant was not their absence but the fact that such a conference could be convened: both because it would have been inconceivable before February 1990, and because so many people were prepared to attend.

It was at the conference that I obtained my first direct meeting with persons who were prepared to state openly that they were interested in Marxism. Furthermore, among the 300 (or more) who attended there were rank-and-file members of the ANC, of the SACP, of Cosatu, and also of smaller political groups of the left. It was this conference that I addressed in the opening session.

By coincidence the conference met just after the failed coup in Moscow. It would have been absurd to speak without commenting on the events in Moscow, of the banning of the Russian Communist Party, on the toppling of statues of Lenin and of other Bolsheviks throughout the USSR and eastern Europe. I spoke of the importance of the collapse of Stalinism in allowing Marxists to rescue the theory that had been bowdlerized over the past seven decades. I did this in part by tracing the impact of Russia on the progress of the left in South Africa — from inspiration



through to degradation as the CPSA (as it was known before 1950) uncritically accepted whatever happened in the USSR.<sup>4</sup>

I felt an antipathy in the hall. The university was a stronghold of the ANC and the SACP and, despite the disquiet over what had been happening in the USSR, or perhaps because of what had been happening in eastern Europe since the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, such public declamations were not welcome. But I had not yet finished. I proceeded to discuss the use of Stalinist methods in the ANC, referring specifically to the tortures and executions of mutineers in *Umkhonto we Sizwe* in the Angolan camps in 1984. There could be no democracy in South Africa, I said, if such methods were used against critics.

Some delegates were delighted others were discomfited and others again were angry. Among the latter were members of the ANC and also of the small Trotskyist factions, particularly as I had said that they were irrelevant in the current situation.

It was an acerbic address, reflecting what I saw as the crisis in the world working class movement. The incubus of Stalinism that had all but overwhelmed the socialist movement had to be excised and to have kept silent would have been inexcusable. Nonetheless delegates were reportedly saying, as similar audiences had said over decades when confronted by the crimes done in the name of socialism in the USSR: 'that now was not the time to speak of such matters'. This is a view with which I could not agree. Over the decades socialists had been urged to stay silent over the crimes in the USSR, in eastern Europe, in China and in South East Asia. Critics had even been urged to remain silent about events in Cambodia, where Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge had murdered millions of innocent victims. This had not saved the left from universal condemnation but had left the socialist movement without the moral base to condemn what was obviously indefensible.

It was apparent that I was probably the only one present who would have raised the issue of the ANC mutiny and linked it with Stalinist influences. Yet, in view of the massive cover up of those events it was crucial that the issue be raised — both for the sake of the victims of that repression, and for the protection of future generations whose right to dissent has to be protected. Furthermore, the entire question of democracy within socialism, posed so urgently by the events in eastern Europe, needed discussion. Contrary to what was said, there was in my opinion, 'no other alternative'. For that I had no need to recant or apologise.<sup>5</sup>

This is not the place for a detailed discussion of the topics presented over the weekend. Like all conferences the papers reflected the preoccupations of the authors and this produced a number of contributions that reflected a headlong flight from Marxism. The God in Moscow had failed, eastern Europe had fallen apart and territories in Africa that had been upheld as foci of socialism had all but collapsed. Instead of subjecting this brand of 'socialism' to scrutiny — with all the problems that would be encountered by former protagonists of Soviet policy — there was a retreat to the panacea of the 'free market'. Much that had once appeared in Marxist texts, including the centrality of the working class in restructuring society, was expunged.

The arguments were a rehash of old ideas, set in a new world situation. We were informed that there would be no investment coming from the major powers and



the old eastern bloc, itself in great difficulty, would not be able to supply any aid. Therefore the ANC (as the presumed next government) would have to enlarge the field of trade and commerce by embracing all of southern Africa. This was the only way forward: for the enlargement of capital, and of capital accumulation. This was the path to restructuring South Africa through the good offices of the ANC (and its partners, the communists). All this in the name of bringing Marxism up to date.<sup>6</sup>

The paper by Hillel Ticktin was unique in setting out the problems that had confronted the USSR and eastern Europe.<sup>7</sup> It was even more exceptional in view of the poverty of theory displayed in so many of those who spoke over the weekend. Yet, the history of socialism during the 20th century has been dominated by the October revolution, and knowledge of what happened in Russia should be mandatory for all who speak as Marxists.

Perhaps it is better to skip over the papers offered up to an audience that had come to learn, but went away disappointed in the fare. However it is necessary to comment on the activities of small groups who came to harangue and to win members. It is standard practice for leftwing groups to use conferences to find possible sympathizers. On that score there can be no complaint. But it is painful to be subjected to soapbox hectoring at session after session. Many of these small factions had little to contribute by way of theory. They seemed to believe that by proclaiming again and again the truth that capitalism was in crisis, that they had said something real or significant. Or so it seemed when I listened to one lengthy presentation from a member of the Marxist Workers Tendency (MWT) proclaiming his fraction's position that the ANC would be transformed to become the instrument of socialist reconstruction. This was a point of view that not even the most ardent follower of the ANC (the MWT excluded) would have endorsed. But they were indefatigable — and capable of boring any audience to tears. What the audience did not know was that the mother body of the MWT in Britain, the Militant tendency, had just resolved to drop the entryist tactic after spending forty fruitless years in the Labour Party having failed to transform it into an instrument for 'socialist reconstruction'.

### **The Political Opposition in South Africa**

There can be no prescription on what should or should not be discussed at a conference on Marxism. However, it is less than strange that there were no papers defending the theory of 'colonialism of a special type' and no papers on the theory of permanent revolution. It was even more remarkable that there were no papers on the nature of socialist democracy, and no serious discussion of the relationship between Marxism and nationalism. Given the obvious appeal to large sections of the population of the ANC, of Inkatha, and of several smaller organizations like the Pan Africanist Congress, the Azanian People's Organization, the New Unity Movement — all of them nationalist or sympathetic to nationalism — this was a major problem that should needed discussion. It was not on the agenda, although it is this that divided many socialist groups and needed appraisal. The history of left groups has been littered with attempts to deal with this problem, and most have been shown by



events to be empty of content. The editors of this journal have consistently claimed that Marxists have an obligation to protect the national movements from persecution by the government, and can, on specific issues, co-operate with such bodies. However, we have said, Marxist organizations have to proclaim their independence from such bodies, and oppose them when their actions are detrimental to the interests of the working class. The subject needs airing and continued debate. To ignore it, particularly in the South African arena, is to be blind to what is happening in the country.

Wherever I went in the country it was quite obvious that most persons who wanted change looked to the ANC as the next government. Some might have said so regretfully, but the majority believed that the ANC would be the governing body by right. As so many said: 'there is no alternative'. Together with this view, most expressed the view that the ANC (together with the SACP) would usher in a democratic regime, based on the magic formula of one person one vote. The franchise and a democratic assembly were thereby elevated to a social ideal that was divorced from the material base of the society that was to be formed: as if democratic forms under capitalism have been anything else than a cover for ruthless exploitation.

Surveying the political field, the only force able to stop the ANC (by fair or foul methods) is the present government. Short of de Klerk manipulating events to achieve that end, there is no obvious alternative to the ANC dominating, or having sufficient strength, to form an electorally backed government. Yet, despite this one obvious fact, stories about the ANC did not show that the confidence of its supporters was backed by either political adroitness or by organizational efficiency.

It is not possible to provide a comprehensive account of the state of the ANC, both because conditions across the country varied so much, and also because information was so uneven and even contradictory. Membership of the ANC is stated to be just above or below half a million: much less than targeted, but large by any standard. This does not provide any more than a bare statistic of recruitment: it says nothing about the functioning of the movement, nor of the membership. My information was mainly anecdotal, and that is not sufficient for analysis. But what I heard was not very impressive. In Soweto, I was told, the Congress Youth League had not been able to meet over the past five months because it could not get a quorum. On the other hand, the white dominated Braamfontein and Houghton branches functioned well. In the eastern Cape, I was informed by an ANC official, the organization had the support of every African. They were not necessarily politically educated, but they trusted the leadership and were completely loyal. But another informant said that the membership in Grahamstown had little faith in the ability of the leadership to achieve anything and they had been contemplating alternative organisational methods. In Durban, where many referred to a 'cabal' which dominated the organization, there was little doubt that the SACP played a significant backroom role in directing activity. But even they differed with Harry Gwala, hard-line Stalinist, who publicly supported the coup in August, and who controlled the activities of local *Umkhonto we Sizwe* activists to the north of Durban. The stories I heard were contradictory, and even when my informant did



admit that there were serious internal weaknesses in the organization of the ANC, this was excused on the grounds of past harassment.

There were many stories about the ANC that obviously needed more probing. The ANC has bought and occupied the former headquarters of Shell. This provided it with a central office with all the space it could need. However, this has not converted the ANC into an efficient, or indeed, an effective organization. It has not led to a body able to organize effectively or campaign around the many serious problems facing local communities, nor produce guidelines for future social construction. Instead, it seems, the leaders react to issues on an *ad hoc* basis, without seriously considering the effects of what they say. In October there were two major statements on economics: one by Mandela, who apparently stated that the mines and finance houses would be nationalised by the ANC, and one by Ramaphosa who said that loans made to the existing government would not necessarily be honoured by a future (ANC) government. Both statements were made without consulting the National Executive Council, both were repudiated, restated, and then disappeared into oblivion.

It was also not possible to find out more about the ANC finances. It was reported to the July conference that over six hundred million Rand had been collected from foreign powers.<sup>8</sup> But it appears that some of the money has disappeared. Land, bought in the name of private persons in Zimbabwe or Zambia (for security reasons) is no longer available. There is little accounting for assets in the ANC. For example, the printing presses purchased in Europe are said to have 'disappeared' and the ANC does not have a local press at its disposal.

Despite the report on assets, there were contradictory reports emanating from ANC quarters. During September it was announced that recruiting by *Umkhonto we Sizwe* was to cease because there were no further funds. During the following week two events followed in rapid succession: first Winnie Mandela declared that Umkhonto was being built up to become the future army of South Africa, and then, in Durban, returned members of *Umkhonto we Sizwe* took control of the ANC offices, demanding their promised but still unpaid allowances of R2000. Unconfirmed reports in Durban said that the men had taken hostages in the offices in order to secure the money. They were persuaded to leave. It was reported that no monies had been paid since the middle of June because funds were exhausted, but it was hoped to secure additional money with which to honour the promise.

The other nationalist organizations (Inkatha excepted) have meagre resources, small premises, and little organizational presence outside a few localities. I was unable to obtain membership figures, and stories of their meetings did not inspire confidence. If correct, the account of the chanting at PAC meetings was bizarre and absurd. The members met the call of the meeting's leader with the chant:

*One settler, one bullet,*

*One bullet, one settler.*

*Ten settlers, one machine gun,*

*One machine gun, ten settlers.*

*A hundred settlers, one bazooka,*



*One bazooka, a hundred settlers.*

... and so on.

There are variations on this theme at different meetings and in PAC publications. But they are all of the same standard. Yet, in popular parlance, the PAC is to the left of the ANC! Perhaps it is fortunate that those who chanted had never held a rifle in their hands.

The SACP is different. It too has few resources, its office space is modest — and the collapse of the eastern European regimes has left them in serious difficulty. It claims 15–20,000 members, but it is not certain whether this is a nominal, or a real, tally. The party is no longer the monolithic movement that it used to be. It is split on several issues, including its appraisal of the coup; it no longer had a clear external policy; and it is not unanimous on the decision to remain wedded to the ANC. In one Cape Town branch those who supported the coup tended to be Africans, while the anti-coup group was keenly aware of the ethnic division. The chairperson apparently declared that she had no intention of being bound by what was said at the meeting. The more the party changes, the more it remains the same.

According to its pre-conference claims the SACP believes in a multi-party state, does not claim to be the exclusive representative of the working class and is prepared to debate issues. This does not stand up to scrutiny and was negated by non-appearance at the Conference on Marxism where its democratic pretensions could have been tested. Furthermore there were several reports of the SACP's determination to gain controlling positions inside the ANC — either through the omnipresent 'cabal', or by manipulating positions inside the National Executive Committee of the ANC. Whatever the current position, there is little evidence that the SACP has learnt how to conduct affairs openly and democratically. Precisely what turns will be decided at its conference in December is uncertain, but turn it will if it seems likely to win it more converts.

Finally, only when the SACP openly declares its membership, acts as an independent organization and enters into open public debate can its claims to openness be accepted. I had no reason to believe that it had altered its character, nor that individuals hardened inside its Stalinist shell could be transformed. Their new tactics and methods showed no transformation, no real rejection of, and in fact no ability to understand, what had happened in the past.

### **Meeting New Challenges**

Again and again it was apparent that the major political groups had no programme with which to lead the majority of the population. Other bodies are equally inflexible. They hold on to old formulae and speak the language of the 1950s. They mistake faith in old slogans for principles, and offer no new analyses to meet current problems. This has led them into sectarian politics with little to offer the population. Most bodies had spent decades fighting against apartheid as a thing-in-itself, and they were unable to alter course. Their ideologies had become encrusted with old generalisations and they could not meet new demands. The ANC was torn between becoming a politi-



cal organization, and acting (as it has claimed) of being 'a government in waiting'. If it is to become a party it has still to demonstrate its ability to campaign on behalf of its constituents.

The ANC is further torn between its natural inclination to work in the African townships and the need to satisfy the aspirations of other sections of the population. This has led it in contradictory directions: calling for ethnic leadership in the western Cape (where Mandela called for greater representation of Coloureds in the Congress leadership) and spending excessive energy trying to assure whites of its good intentions. In turning to the rural areas the ANC has adopted the easiest line of working alongside Homelands leader's, or of encouraging Chiefs to believe that their position will be secure inside an ANC led country. Perhaps that is the ANC policy, but it provides little confidence of social change under its leadership. Yet part of the problem lies in the failure to change the nature of the movement. Instead of becoming a party and campaigning on behalf of its constituents, there is the continued insistence that it is really the government-to-be, and that excuses it from taking up the many problems that must be confronted if change is even to seem meaningful.

### **Workers and Workers' Organization**

The one body that I have not discussed thus far are the trade union federations that claims a membership of nearly three quarters of a million, mainly black, workers. By far the most important of these is Cosatu, although no doubt attention should be paid to the smaller body known as Nactu and those smaller unaffiliated unions. However, because I only saw members of Cosatu, I will restrict my comments to this one body.

Firstly, it became obvious that in the absence of a socialist movement, the only organization that could claim to speak for the workers was the trade union movement. This was problematical. The trade unions only represented a portion of the working class, excluded important sections of the labour force, and had little presence in the rural areas (despite new attempts at such organisation). Furthermore the unions had not organized the unemployed, had no strategy for approaching that important element of the workforce and no means of knowing whether they could succeed where so many had tried, and failed, before.

The problem was exacerbated by the high rate of redundancies as businesses either went out of existence, or trimmed their workforce to survive. It is said that over 1,300 workers are being made redundant every day of the year. In the one industry that once employed over 600,000 workers, the mines, the number of workers has been drastically reduced and is likely to drop even further. The number of workers in this once strategic industry is now nearer 350,000 and must go down even more drastically unless the price of gold goes up appreciably. There is now one full time official whose sole task is to find employment, or some occupation, for the tens of thousands of workers who have been dismissed. The situation in other industries, although not so severe, indicates that the trade unions will lose



a considerable section of their membership in the coming months. An economic revival will lead to a reversal of current trends, but that is still some way off.

Given the very best of conditions, in which the trade unions could spread to areas in which they had not yet contacted their potential membership, it is not certain that the unions could act as the vanguard of the working class. The task of the trade unions, no matter how earnestly they try, remains reformist. The unions have to improve wages, improve work conditions, and also stop unwarranted dismissals. Given the high rate of inflation (running at about 15%) the unions have to achieve the near impossible just to stop the conditions of the workers from deteriorating.

In so far as the unions are fighting to maintain their members at work, and keeping their wages intact, they perform an invaluable task. Also, these unions offer a training ground for organization for their members, and help instil a sense of purpose and confidence in the workplace. This is not the same as acting as political organizers. Cosatu has followed the ANC (usually uncritically) in tactics and in programme ever since it adopted the Freedom Charter in 1985, and that has led to innumerable difficulties. The trade unions have enrolled workers at the workplace irrespective of their political affiliation. Initially this was not a problem but it seems to have led to the alienation of hostel dwellers (among others) who owed allegiance to Inkatha. Cosatu has also provided the ANC with a radical cloak — one which has only helped conceal the supine nature of the national movement. I have referred above to the role of Cosatu in getting the Peace Accord signed. Its leaders, trained in bargaining, will become the instrument for achieving concessions in the pre-negotiating talks and in the actual negotiations. In that case it is most likely that all credit will go to the ANC and its political allies — and failures will be laid at the door of the trade union movement.

The trade union movement has other more urgent tasks. Nationally it has to prepare a programme to maintain its independence in whatever new system is installed. It has to build workers' councils to allow the workers a direct say in whatever is decided in the talks with the government. It has to act, not as a cover for the nationalist movements, but as the organizer of the working class in the struggle against capitalism, and it has to build international contacts with radical trade union movements in Latin America, Asia and other regions of the world.

Just before I left South Africa the new VAT was implemented. For months Cosatu, together with the ANC, had demanded the withdrawal of some of the new taxes: in particular to those on basic foods, medicines and medical services. Despite all protests, the government only made minimal amendments to its list of taxable goods and services. On the day that the taxes were introduced there were demonstrations across the country and some towns were reduced to a near standstill. A committee against the tax, led by the ANC and Cosatu called a two day general strike (later renamed a stay at home) for the 4–5th of November. As I write it is obvious that there was massive support for the demonstration. As an act of support for the ANC and Cosatu the action was obviously significant. Yet there seems to have been a waste of energy in the event. After the two days, in which some workers were victimised, it was back to normal with little or nothing gained.



Further details of what happened in the country, and information about individual communities, is only now becoming available: but one matter was clear from the outset — the stayaway was conceived as a backing to the coming negotiations with the government. The action did nothing to assert working class rights or advance their struggle. Once again the workers were taken up the hill and then marched down again.

I left the country convinced of the need: firstly, for a civil rights movement to protect people from the present security apparatus, and also from an unrepentant ANC that refuses to acknowledge the enormity of its crimes in the mutiny of 1984. Secondly, the need for a revolutionary socialist movement, associated with the trade union movement, able to take its place as an independent force in advancing the cause of democratic socialism and as the guarantor of civil liberties. Taking cognizance of the absolute weakness and disunity of socialist forces, the way forward will probably be through the linking of existing groups to foster informed discussion: both of theory and of practical problems. Only through such co-operation, which must avoid any suspicion of poaching or of forced unity, can a socialist movement be launched. To wait any longer, when the way seems open for a working class movement with a clear socialist programme seems absurd. This places a severe burden on those many small groups that all declared the need for a nation wide movement, but it is a burden they must assume.

## Notes

1. See appendix on CST and the permanent revolution
2. This is described in part by the **Human Rights Commission** (SA), in its special report of August 1991.
3. A similar point is made by a member of the ANC, Yunus Carrim, in **Liberation Movement and Beyond: Challenges for the ANC** (1991), Catholic Institute for International Relations, London, in his discussion of the negotiations between the government and the ANC.
4. The text of my address appears on p 56 of this issue.
5. I spoke or lectured at eight campuses. The only talk that 'could not find a slot' on the timetable, and never eventuated, was a proposed lecture at the University of the Witwatersrand on the factors that lay behind the mutiny in Umkhonto we Sizwe'.
6. A new essay, by Robert Davies (1991), **South Africa in the Region: A Post Apartheid Future**, Catholic Institute for International Relations, London, spells out this policy in some detail.
7. In this issue we print an article in which the conflict between the market and planning is shown to have been central to the discussions within the left opposition in the USSR in the 1920s. This sets the problem, that seemed to be unexplored by delegates at the conference, within the framework of Marxist theory.
8. This included the US, Australia, Sweden and other European states. The current rate of exchange is R5 to the pound sterling.