

INTRODUCING OURSELVES

Continuity and Discontinuity on the Left

Our readers might be puzzled by the illustration on our cover. What possible relevance could a flysheet for municipal elections in 1915 have for South Africa in September 1988? Furthermore, what was the International Socialist League (ISL), and who were these candidates?

To the new generation of revolutionaries the names David Ivon Jones and Sidney Bunting probably mean nothing. What happened during the early days of the socialist movement in South Africa is known to only a few students or workers. Yet, the South African left has a long and proud record — even if there were times when the early socialists were grievously wrong in their interpretation of South African conditions.

The left before the first World War brought together the trade union tradition of Europe, and the small, mainly emigre groups that carried to South Africa the ideologies of socialist groups in Europe. The Jews of eastern Europe adhered in the main to the Bund, and their concern seemed to have been focussed largely on what was happening in Tsarist Russia; but a few immigrants came to South Africa as adherents of the Bolshevik party. It also seems likely from fragmentary information about the newspapers received in the country that persons of Italian and German origin were adherents of socialist groups in the countries of their origin. Yet class struggles in South Africa, and in particular, the clash between (white) miners and the Chamber of Mines, gave rise to syndicalist and socialist groups rooted in South African conditions.

There are few colonial countries of the time that can boast of socialists as committed as Olive Schreiner, champion of the workers and an ardent feminist; or of 'Pickhandle' Mary Fitzgerald who led the workers against mounted police (wielding pickhandles against a vicious local constabulary). And there were few centres in which the working class stood so valiantly against mineowners and government in a series of strikes, culminating in the general strikes of July 1913 and January 1914.

Being South Africa, the struggles of pre-war days were divided along the colour line. This does not make them any less part of the history of the working class, even if racial division

weakened the impact of their campaigns and widened the gap between white and black workers. We have cause to celebrate the campaigns and strikes of 1913: the struggle by Free State women against the passes; the refusal of labourers to work at the Jagersfontein diamond mine after the assault on, and death of, one of their comrades; and the mass strike of Indian indentured labourers in the coal mines and the sugar plantations.

In 1915, during the First World War a group of men and women inside the all-white Labour Party declared their opposition to the government and the war it was fighting. These socialists called for the organization of black and white workers to struggle for the overthrow of the government and the establishment of a socialist society; and were amongst the first in the world to call for the establishment of a new International to oppose the imperialist war.

Jones and Bunting, the two candidates whose photos are included on our cover, were particularly important in the history of socialism in South Africa. They were the first to call for the organization of black workers — at a time when trade unions were exclusively white, and the Labour Party believed in an apartheid which would remove all blacks from the towns. And it was Jones and Bunting, inside the International Socialist League, who took the lead in forming the first black trade union movement, the Industrial Workers of Africa.

The ISL was small, and faced persecution at the hands of the police, the soldiers and young rowdies. Members were assaulted, and then prosecuted for having caused the affray by distributing leaflets, or voicing their ideas. Despite this, they persevered, laid the foundation of the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) in 1921, affiliated to the Communist International (or Comintern) and called for a socialist South Africa.

In the early days of the communist movement, debates were conducted in public and printed in the party press, and in the process party members were educated. The later stultification that came in the era of Stalinism was unknown, and none was afraid to voice an opinion. The degeneration of the Comintern led to a clamp on open discussion, and members were expected to change course when so directed from above. The main attribute of a communist became the ability to mouth the latest slogan from Moscow, sing praise to Stalin and condemn all who dared to criticize the 'leaders'. Many members who found this

intolerable dropped out of politics in disgust: a few joined with the Left Opposition in South Africa. Their history has yet to be told.

We reprint some of the writings of Jones, and a debate conducted between Bunting and Jones in 1919 on the roles of black and white workers in the struggle for socialism in South Africa. These arguments were to influence party members during the Rand Revolt of 1922, and the faulty arguments of the time had a profound effect on the future of the CPSA.

Alongside these documents we include an appraisal of Cecil Frank Glass, one of the first left oppositionist in the country. Glass was a founding member and leading official of the CPSA, and with his comrades sought clarification on the forces capable of transforming South Africa. His analysis of the Bulhoek massacre and other writings will be published in later issues of our journal, but like others he mis-read the role of the white workers in South Africa. However, Glass was a dedicated revolutionary, and he worked his way through the problems he confronted, finding his way to the working class struggle wherever he went. In the early 1930s he was posted to China as a press correspondent, and he was horrified by what he saw of Kuomintang brutality. The Kuomintang's use of criminal gangs to destroy the workers' movement has echoes today in the use of vigilante gangs to suppress the struggle in South Africa, but in the 1920s and early 1930s this was not yet a feature of South African police methods. But there was a parallel with events in South Africa in the Comintern's demand that the Chinese communists collaborate with their own bourgeoisie and middle class in the 'bloc of four classes' and surrender their organizational independence. Following orders from Moscow they worked as loyal members of the Kuomintang. Glass witnessed the continued massacre of working class cadres by the Kuomintang and their criminal associates, and he joined with a small group of Chinese revolutionaries who tried to reconstruct the working class movement. The internationalism of Glass was in the best tradition of the Marxist movement, and we pay tribute to him by telling part of his story in these pages.

As we have indicated, the Moscow connection in the 1920s and 1930s led to tragedy for members of the CPSA. Leading members, who had devoted their lives to the struggle, were hounded out of the party. Nobody was safe from these

inquisitors, and an entire generation of communists was vilified and expelled. The first black general secretary of the CPSA, Albert Nzula, died mysteriously in the USSR, and an account of his demise is told as a logical conclusion of the critique of George Padmore, the black functionary of the Comintern before he later became the leading champion of Pan Africanism. Now that a monument to the victims of Stalin is to be erected in Moscow — as if that will restore them to life — we can ask: will the names of the South African victims be added to the list?

The story of revolutionary endeavour in South Africa is one of sharp discontinuities. Breaks because of police harassment, and also because revolutionaries became disillusioned in what they saw or heard of Stalin's Russia; breaks because people just became tired and lost hope; or breaks because it was easier to live comfortably without struggle. There were also those who found it easier to join with nationalists — whether black or white, and there were the traitors who accepted the pieces of silver offered them by the police. As a result, fresh generations had to learn anew, and the debates of the past were forgotten. The lessons that should have been learnt were lost.

In the period of Stalinism the Marxist tradition was ruptured. Obedience to Comintern directives replaced Marxist thought, and slogans were tossed about by groups whose only concern was to curry favour from Stalin's henchmen. There was no advancement of general theories and every 'comrade' was required to bow to the words of the leading clique in Moscow. Nor was there any place for serious and sustained study of local conditions. Marxism as a science ceased to exist or gave way to opportunism and falsification.

What Remains?

There has been a paucity of Marxist thinkers in South Africa, despite the fact that socialists like Jones had a perception of local and world events that went far beyond that of most of his contemporaries. The foundation he built stood the early communists in good stead, but with the defeat of the German working class after 1919, and the successive failures in China, Spain and elsewhere, revolutionary optimism gave way to cynicism. Attempts were made to reopen the old debates by the Trotskyists, and some notable writing appeared in journals

like *Spark* (1935-9). Copies were not easily available in South Africa when war broke out, and many small groups started all over again, seeking theories that would inform them about the complex problems confronting revolutionary groups.

One of our aims will be to relocate documents that have stood the test of time, even if their conclusions are debatable, and offer them to serious students of conditions in South Africa. In so doing, we believe that we will advance our understanding of the problems that beset revolutionaries today. Starting in No.2 we will reproduce items from *Spark* and provide an appraisal of some of its contributors.

What then are the problems that have to be addressed? Firstly, we must offer an analysis of capitalist relations in South Africa. We must trace its development in the country, and examine the role of gold (the money commodity) in the evolution of the country since 1886/7. Starting in the 1880s as a backward outpost of world capital penetration, South Africa witnessed a devastating war and then emerged as a united country, still backward in many of its institutions, but placed at the very centre of world capitalist relations. Writing in 1922 from Moscow in the *Communist International*, Ivon Jones stated correctly:

The gold mining industry of the Rand has been described as the fulcrum of world capital. Twenty years ago the old Boer republics became an obstacle to the Chamber of Mines, and the whole British army was requisitioned to blow them out of existence.

Some of these truths have had to be rediscovered, but have not been advanced with Ivon Jones's polemical thrust, and without spelling out the consequences. Jones did not necessarily draw the correct conclusions from his analysis, still believing that the white workers would be the force capable and willing to overthrow capital, but his overall perceptions were lost in the bleak period that followed the defeat of the white workers in 1922. In fact his article on the 1922 strike seems to have been forgotten. It will be reprinted in a later issue.

An analysis of capitalism in South Africa must allow for a discussion of the role of racial discrimination as a factor in capital accumulation, in the development of a local bourgeoisie, in the industrialization of the country and in the splitting of the

working class along colour lines. In presenting this discussion we believe that our contributors have new things to say — but, as we said in an initial letter when we announced the launching of *Searchlight South Africa*, we will open our pages to informed debate on these topics. Only such discussion can allow for a clarification of these issues that seem to vex so many analysts of South Africa. Our only fear is that some readers will not respond to our challenges, and will stay silent. If that is indeed the case, then once again there will be discontinuity in the development of socialist theory, and that can only be to the detriment of those who are struggling to establish an independent socialist movement inside South Africa.

A Socialist Movement in South Africa

We do not underestimate the difficulty of building a revolutionary socialist party in South Africa. The Communist Party has already laid its 'claim' to being that party, and we have little doubt that they will follow the old Stalinist path and endeavour to stop any other group performing that task. Their cleaving to the Freedom Charter, their manipulation of the nationalist movement and political capitulation to it can only mean that they will oppose and sabotage any move towards socialism in South Africa. Once again they follow slavishly in the footsteps of Moscow, and they will back the USSR moves at 'disengagement' — not in the interests of the working class, but as the satraps of Gorbachev's disengagement from Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

There is nothing to indicate that the Stalinists have changed their methods. They will use every means to remove any rivals, and will sabotage any movement they cannot control. But the SACP is only one of several forces that revolutionary groups have had to confront. Trade unionists and members of opposition groups fell victim of brutal 'necklacing' gangs during the uprising of 1984-87, and many militants were murdered in the vicious infighting between Buthelezi's Inkatha and the UDF. There can be no excuse for these fatalities, and yet they are only the inverse side to the oppressive machinery of the South African state. It will be the duty of revolutionary groups to protect their members — both from the Stalinists and the nationalists as well as the army (with its policy of 'total strategy'), the police force and its counter insurgency policy, the

vigilante gangs, and the state's Joint Management Boards, all combining to smash any threat to capital's supremacy in South Africa.

The threat of physical destruction is real and must be confronted by the revolutionary movement. At the same time it must also be stressed that the greatest obstacle to the formation of revolutionary movement is the lack of Marxist training in South Africa. Although it is obvious that the bannings make it difficult to obtain many books, this obstacle can be overcome. Yet, there is little evidence that those who call themselves socialists have made a serious study of the original Marxist texts. We search in vain among the writings coming out of South Africa for evidence that there has been a serious study of either *Capital* or of the *Grundrisse*. Those who write from the left fall prey to 'instant fashions' coming out of Europe or America. Articles can be dated from references to Poulantzas, Althusser or Gramsci; quotations seem to be inserted as a substitute for theory, and the employment of words like 'dialectics' and 'essence' are often no more than a cover for loose thinking.

We fear that the paucity of theory among those who are struggling must act as a break on any assault on the state. We do not doubt the bravery of those who face the authorities and their armed forces, but bravery is not enough. There has to be clarity on objectives, and clarity on methods. There has got to be serious consideration of what is required, and critical appraisal of those movements that claim to offer leadership. Without theory struggle is blind, and by the same token, theory without struggle is empty.

We believe that three principles must guide the working class in formulating its strategy. Firstly, that the working class is the universal class, and that only this class can provide the struggle with the social force needed to usher in socialism. Only the workers can lead the rest of the population towards the seizure of power, and the creation of a socialist society in which the primary aim will be to abolish all class differences. No other class is capable of providing a lead in the struggle to transform society, and only the working class is capable of putting an end to all discrimination.

Secondly, we believe that in this era of decaying capital it is essential that revolutionaries understand the laws of motion of society — and that dialectics be understood as providing the key to such movement. Only then will the working class grasp the

nature of the enemies it confronts. Alongside the open repression used by the state, the ruling class will engage in phoney negotiations, in order to find a willing set of collaborators with whom, or through whom, it can continue to govern. As long as there is no organized working class force capable of challenging the state, the bourgeoisie will be able to manoeuvre without restraint, and frustrate moves to restructure South Africa.

Thirdly, we believe that the struggle is not and cannot be confined to South Africa alone. Socialism can only exist as an international system, and talk of socialism in one district, one region, or even one country, is doomed to failure. However bravely the liberation movements fought in territories neighbouring South Africa, they could not transform their societies. They were always beholden to the superpowers — and always at their mercy. By the same token we believe that irrespective of the merits of SWAPO (and we have yet to see a meaningful programme for reconstructing Namibia) and no matter how long it battles on, there can be no economic independence for this impoverished society, and no social change, until there is complete emancipation in South Africa.

The centrality of the working class as the force for change must determine the policy of all who have not lost faith in socialism. We reject the disillusioned voices of those who once believed that there was socialism in the eastern bloc, and now warn against working class leadership. It therefore came as no surprise to read Gavin Williams's declaration in *Transformation*, No.6, that:

The experiences of socialist countries, which are today facing more severe economic and political crises than their capitalist counterparts, suggests that we need to be more cautious, and more critical before advancing socialism as a slogan and counterpoising it to nationalist and democratic demands.

Indeed, if there was socialism in the USSR, or in eastern Europe, or China (and what about Cuba, Nicaragua, Ethiopia, and so on?), we would have to pause. But was there socialism in the USSR where the workers were stripped of all power, where the economy is in a mess and there is talk of reintroducing market forces and unemployment, and where the rulers — led by Stalin — could wipe out millions of men, women, and children, and

have all Lenin's comrades condemned to death as Nazi agents? Was there socialism in China, where people could be ruthlessly exterminated for holding views contrary to that of the leadership? And where is the socialism in Ethiopia which oppresses the Eritrean people? or the socialism of other statelets which claim that title?

The meaning of socialism must be examined afresh, particularly now that it is clear that there was never such a system in Europe or Asia, and certainly not in Africa or Latin America. In presenting a profile of Padmore, mentor of Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana (how many of the younger generation in South Africa even remember his name?), we have begun the long task of opening up the meaning of real transformation in the former colonial world, and showing that change can not become effective until there is a link between the struggles of the former colonial world with that of the workers of Europe, Asia, and the USA.

Each country will face its own unique problems, and in South Africa we must envisage attempts at stifling our struggle from across the world. When Ivon Jones spoke of the gold industry as being 'the fulcrum of world capital', he was also warning the South African workers that they faced the combined might of world capital, prepared to fight for the control of the gold supply. That must make the struggle in South Africa more bitter than elsewhere, and make the South African revolution the fulcrum of the world struggle for socialism.

The Position Now

We have used the language of struggle in this introduction, because it is unreal to speak of South Africa since 1984 without absorbing the experience of four years of bitter fights, in the factories and mines, in the townships, and in the countryside. Whether the focus was wages, or rents, or schooling, there has been continuous upsurge across the country. The demands have been for control of the township administration, for a living wage and the right to organize, for an end to phoney (or indeed no) representation in government. The struggles have been conducted by youth groups, by community organizations, by student councils, by trade unions and by political groupings.

But the struggle has not had an effective leadership, or a strategy. In fact groups have fought each other and struggled for

local supremacy, in the trade unions, the townships, the squatter camps, and the so-called Homelands. The newspapers have been littered with the names of groups, small and large, which assumed some prominence locally or nationally: the 'comrades'; the Youth Congress; the UDF and Azapo; the Inkatha movement and the ANC; trade unions and trade union federations.

The struggle which should lead to clear cut political and class alignments have been muddied by the vague populist leanings of so many of the movements, with their catch-all policies. We are in favour of a united struggle against oppression, but must insist that the workers maintain their organizational independence. Unification on an all-class basis can only confuse issues, and open the way to middle class control. We believe that the middle class — and they are the ones who control Inkatha, and the ANC/UDF, the PAC and Azapo — lack a social programme that can bring meaningful change for the people. Indeed this class would rather unleash sectional fights (Inkatha vs the UDF; Azapo vs the UDF, and so on) and use the necklace or the knobkerrie to settle accounts with opponents.

Yet, despite our belief that socialism will only be won through revolution, we cannot continue to call, in season and out, for strikes, for boycotts and for revolts. In the present period of downturn, such calls can only exhaust the people, and false slogans (as in the summons to make townships ungovernable) can only lead to defeat and disillusionment. There are times when a responsible leadership must know how to call on the people for restraint, so that they can regain their strength for the next confrontation. Without surrendering the right to go into battle when the people rise again, it is essential the correct transitional slogans be advanced after a defeat, or in a period of relative political quiet.

It seems that the correct slogan in the present period would be for the convening of a Constituent Assembly, at which representatives from town and country, from factories and communities, from young and old, meet to put forward their demands. This is not an alternative to struggle, nor will it produce the socialist society we demand. In fact, there must be no illusion that the ruling class will allow such a gathering: but by raising the slogan now it might be possible to stop secret discussions behind the backs of the people, and prevent a sell out by sections of the nationalist or trade union movement.

For the same reason we believe that it is time the workers called on the ANC to stop its senseless campaign of bombing. The atrocities perpetrated by the police and the army must not be repeated by those who claim that their objective is freedom. Instead of advancing the struggle, the activities of these guerrillas only distract from serious campaigning. But even more important, socialism has never been won through the activities of guerrilla armies. Only the mobilization of workers, who will learn how to wield guns, when the time comes, can achieve a socialist society. If we cannot learn from the failures of the struggles in Viet Nam, Cambodia, and even China, we will have learnt nothing, and will only leave it to future generations of Gavin Williams (if such is to be our fate) to bemoan the failure of the new 'socialist states'.

Searchlight South Africa

In deciding to launch this new journal, we hope to carry forward and further the work of those journals that raised the message of revolution in the past. Our success will depend on our ability to analyse issues as they arise, and provide meaningful answers to those who are struggling inside South Africa. The response we received from friends who sent us donations and subscriptions, and promised us articles in the future, means that we can be certain of producing several issues. We trust that as more contributions arrive we will be able to ensure a long life. But to be meaningful in our analyses we need writers who can spotlight the major problems as they emerge in the southern part of the continent of Africa. Our current issue was put together by a few writers, and for this we believe we owe our readers some apology. We do not mean to hog the pages of *Searchlight South Africa*, although we will be around to have our say. We are in the hands of our potential contributors, and we believe that they will not be silent. Only in this way can we hope to offer a way forward.