

## THE SOWETO UPRISING AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF LIBERATORY IDEAS.

June 16, 1976 is a red letter day in the history of the black man's struggle for liberation in South Africa; we do well to commemorate its anniversary. We do so not only to honour the young black heroes who sacrificed their education and their lives for the cause of freedom, not only to remind ourselves that freedom comes with self-sacrifice, that "the path of glory leads but to the grave", but also to learn from the traumatic events of June '76 and thereafter those lessons which will make our own sacrifice even more worthwhile and fruitful.

There are many lessons to be learnt from the Soweto uprising but, in view of the short time at my disposal, I would like to isolate just one, namely, the ideological development which results from the struggle between the ideas of the ruling class and those of the oppressed. Lenin once wrote that development is the struggle of opposites and on the level of ideas the experience of Soweto bears him out in a small way.

Let me hasten to say there are two levels of <sup>ideational</sup> ~~ideational~~ conflict or contradiction in the liberation struggle. There is the conflict between the ideas of the ruling class and the ideas of the oppressed. This conflict is basic. It arises from the objective reality of oppression and exploitation. The ideas of the ruling class cannot be reconciled with the ideas of the oppressed. Their conflict is absolute and cannot be resolved in a peaceful way. It is a life and death struggle for supremacy. Like the gladiators of Ancient Rome the contestants enter the arena to fight until one of them dies, and the victor leaps in triumph. In the social struggle the leap may be backward or forward depending on who wins. If the progressive forces triumph they bring about a qualitative change in society signifying development.

There is another kind of contradiction which is internal, affecting as it does the forces which are on the same side of the barricades. This kind of contradiction usually results from confused thinking which gives birth to false ideas. The seeds of confusion may well be sown deliberately among the oppressed by the ruling class in order to spread distrust and create in-fighting. Such ideas even though they may be expressed by a black man rightly belong to the enemy camp and must be ruthlessly uprooted and cast out no matter how well-intentioned they may be. If the black man who articulates these enemy ideas is also an

enemy agent or an incorrigible sell-out then he too must be thrown out together with his ideas. Let me leave the internal aspect of the conflict of ideas at this point; I shall return to it later.

To go back to the lessons which the Soweto uprising teaches us about the mutually irreconcilable conflict <sup>between</sup> the ideas of the ruling class (their ideas) and the ideas of the oppressed and exploited (our ideas). The conflict began as a peaceful protest by school children. The primary aim of the students at this stage was to demonstrate peacefully against the use of Afrikaans as the medium of instruction in their schools. They had no intention of using force or violence. Even after the first shots were fired they still put up placards which proclaimed, "WE ARE NOT FIGHTING", mistakenly believing that the violent reaction of the police was due to their ignorance of the peaceful intentions of the students.

But the police had other instructions. For over two decades the Government of South Africa had been engaged in the criminal task of suppressing the liberation movement. It had arrested, imprisoned, detained, banned and exiled the leaders of the liberation movement and thus, to all appearances, it had decapitated the movement. In fact the spokesmen of the Government boasted to the world that all was peace and tranquility among its "Bantu" and any talk of unrest was sheer nonsense. Suddenly, out of the blue, just as the rulers were preparing to receive the high priest of imperialism in the person of Kissinger, the Secretary of State of the all-powerful United States of America, who was coming to see for himself how good and quiet things were in the sub-continent, the students of Soweto began their march. (When Kissinger did subsequently arrive, the students irreverently demonstrated against this 'Kiss-a-dog' as they called him). They were against the teaching of Afrikaans, the Boer taal by means of which the Boernasie had harboured illusions of completing the mental subjugation of the black man before proceeding to that of the Englishman. Their mission was to establish a one nation-one-Afrikaner language state in South Africa (een volk, een taal). The students' demonstration was intolerable. The Boers foresaw what the students had failed to see, namely that this was no ordinary march; it was the beginning of the long march to black emancipation. It had to be ~~hipped~~ <sup>hipped</sup> in the bud. ~~For~~

Following their orders the police shot into the crowd of students, killing one small boy, Hector Petersen, and injuring many others. From that moment onwards the struggle of opposites began. What had begun as a peaceful protest by school children developed into a national uprising against national oppression. Soweto exploded in the faces of the Boers and they did not know what had hit them.

If the students had made the initial mistake of thinking that their march would be regarded as a peaceful demonstration, the Boers had made the prior and more serious mistake of thinking black resistance to oppression had died. Black resistance had in fact not died. It had been suppressed but the flame of resistance had never been effectively extinguished. It had lived on in the ideas and emotions of the people; the children drank it with their mothers' milk. The flame was fanned by the wind of continued and escalating oppression until it burst into a prairie fire, which can never be completely put out so long as oppression persists. In Soweto and elsewhere it required the spark of the fatal bullet that struck the chest of young Hector Petersen to set the conflagration ablaze.

The growing ideas of resistance to national oppression can be seen in the slogans and actions adopted by the students. "WHY KILL KIDS FOR AFRIKAANS?", the students asked in disbelief. There was an upsurge of popular anger that culminated in the stoning and firing of buses and buildings which were symbols of the black man's oppression and exploitation. Suddenly the basic nature of the conflict began to dawn on the students. The kids were being killed not just because they did not want Afrikaans but because their demonstration was a threat to the whole future of white supremacy. It was a case of THEIR IDEAS versus OUR IDEAS - a contradiction which could only be resolved by a fight to the death. At this point the students began to look around for and to tap the sources of their strength. "AMANDLA SOWETO! AMANDLA NGAWETU!" Black power had to be counterposed to white power. The struggle of opposites led to this development in the thinking of the young people. The struggle had ceased to be a matter for students only; it embraced the whole black population.

Resistance spread and developed; the blacks throughout South Africa were galvanised into action. There was a demonstration by Indian students at the Durban University of Westville. The Administration block at the University of Zululand was gutted by fire. The bush colleges, symbols of an inferior bantuzised system of education, were under fire. The Coloured youth in the Cape Province were up in arms. All in all the situation looked pretty bad for the Herrenvolk. "RELEASE ALL DETAINEES" the students demanded; and by this they referred not only to the thousands of their own number who had been rounded up by the police but also to the political prisoners in Robben Island and elsewhere. Mandela and Sisulu were mentioned by name. The urban Bantu Councils were denounced and the cry for freedom rang out loud and clear.

The 4th. of August 1976 is a watershed in the development of the struggle in Soweto. The student leaders called for a strike on that day. Thousands of Soweto workers stayed away from work and joined the students in demonstrating for the release of the detainees. By a strange coincidence August the 4th. is the anniversary of one of the great dates of the French Revolution. According to Peter Kropotkin the 4th. August 1789 "...marked one of the great stages in the revolutionary movement and it determined the character of the period which follows it." On that day the rulers of France, under great popular pressure, purported to abolish the feudal system. The pressure exerted by the Soweto students was, of course, not sufficient to extract a commensurate concession from the rulers of South Africa. But by appreciating the important role which the black workers can play by withholding their labour generally, the students did in a way determine the character which the South African revolution must follow. It is true, of course that this was not the first occasion that the black workers were called upon to stay away from work. But on previous occasions such decisions were made by political executives in the calm serenity of their offices and then brought to the workers to implement in furtherance of party political ends. They were not, as in the Soweto case, taken by people immediately engaged in a life and death struggle for national freedom.

The call for a general strike was repeated on the 23rd. August 1976. "AZIKWELWA!" the word got round. Pickets were

placed outside railway stations and bus terminals. The trains and buses ran empty. This strike received overwhelming support. But the general strike called for the 15th. September was even more successful. It is estimated that half a million black workers in Johannesburg and 100,000 in Capetown went on strike, making this the greatest political demonstration in the history of South Africa.

These strikes hit the Herrenvolk where it hurt most, in their pockets. The capitalists raised a storm and in turn exerted pressure on the ruling Broederbond clique to make concessions. The appointment and recommendations of the Riekert and Wiehahn Commissions are a result of the student-led popular struggles of this period. So also are the frenzied attempts by the Government to create, especially in Soweto, an apathetic black proletariat and a stable and cooperative urban black middle class. These concessions are, however, by-products of the fight for freedom; they will not avail to stem the tide of revolution.

It will be remembered that the Herrenvolk, through their police force instigated an indiscriminate and bloody attack on the freedom fighters of Soweto and the black city-dwellers as a whole by African migrant workers living in the seclusion of the men's hostels. It is worthy of note that student leaders and their supporters arranged meetings with the migrant labourers and educated them as to the objectives of the struggle. The migrants were apparently converted because they made no further attacks on the aroused population. This leads me to a brief discussion of the problem of internal contradictions which I raised earlier in this address.

In the course of the freedom struggle we have experienced and we will continue to experience deviations from the progressive line. There are and will continue to be zigzags or regression and periods of temporary stagnation. We have always to be on our guard against the infiltration of enemy ideas whether or not they are introduced intentionally in order to divide us. We must not ignore them just because they are peddled by black people-like ourselves. A dog infected with rabies bites to kill irrespective of whether its colour is black or white.. Let me

briefly refer to some of the dangerous ideas which are current in some quarters of the liberation movement today. The first one is the wrong idea that a single party can by itself win the revolutionary struggle in South Africa; that other progressive parties and groups are redundant and irrelevant and should be ignored or boycotted. Equally absurd and dangerous is the notion that all progressive ideas emanate from one political source only; that, for instance, the Soweto uprising was organised and led or master-minded by a particular political party in exile. In the liberation struggle we distinguish only two sets of ideas - those of the oppressor and those of the oppressed: THEIR ideas and OUR ideas. The ideas of liberation are common currency within the liberation movement. There may be different ways of expressing those ideas, but the ideas themselves are still the common property of the oppressed. The proprietorship of ideas by certain individuals or groups is foreign to the ideology of the liberation movement. It creates an ideological aristocracy not very different in principle from the white labour aristocracy.

Another dangerous idea is the concept that South Africa is multi-national; that there is a white national group, an African national group, a Coloured national group and an Indian national group, all of which have equal status and that therefore provision should be made to secure the interests of each group in a liberated South Africa. This idea plays directly into the hands of the racists with their Bantustans, Colouredstans and Indianstans.

There is yet another dangerous idea that the blacks in South Africa are a colony of the whites and that the Bantustans are an externalisation of this colonial relationship. On this thesis the Matanzimas would be justified in seeking political "independence" from "colonial" domination from South African whites. From this it is easy to see how the establishment of independent Bantustans would be welcomed as a form of national liberation.

The Unity Movement of South Africa, which I represent, does not claim proprietorship of any progressive ideas. It would be easy for me to show that the idea of non-collaboration originated with the Unity Movement as far back as 1943. The same is true in connection with the rejection of liberals and of inferior separate councils for blacks only. The Unity Movement was also first to come out with and put into practice the idea of the unity of all the oppressed blacks whether of African, Coloured or Indian descent. We are happy

that events in Soweto vindicated the ideas first expounded by us but we claim no monopoly of these ideas. Neither do we allege that they were copied from our Movement. On the contrary even if the Unity Movement had never existed the objective imperatives of the liberation struggle would have given birth to them at some stage or another. All we would ask is that all the youth in the liberation movement, even those opposed to us, should read the literature of the Unity Movement and from it adopt unapologetically for our common ~~struggle~~- goal those ideas which they consider suitable for the promotion of the liberation struggle in South Africa.

I conclude this address by ~~making an~~ <sup>repeating</sup> appeal which I made on the occasion of the Sharpeville celebrations to all those parties and organisations which are genuinely interested in the liberation of the black man in South Africa to come together in a united front on a common programme of minimum demands for the liberation of the oppressed masses of South Africa. I am convinced that we can achieve freedom if we are united because  
AMANDLA NGAWETU!

14.6.81

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