

The struggle that toppled apartheid

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DAVID WHITEHOUSE looks at the events that shaped the political period portrayed in a new movie about the struggle against apartheid in South Africa.

IN JUNE 1980, the armed wing of the African National Congress (ANC), known as Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), bombed a major coal-to-oil conversion plant 80 miles east of Johannesburg. It was an "outside job," conducted by MK members who had been in exile in Mozambique.

South African police accused Patrick Chamusso, a plant foreman with Mozambican roots, of spying for the bombers. But Chamusso was uninvolved. In fact, he had avoided politics to that point in his life.

The movie *Catch a Fire* tells the true story of how being tortured by police--and the torture of his wife--pushed Chamusso to join the resistance to the apartheid system.

Chamusso was cleared of the sabotage, but he fled the country to join MK, a journey that took him first to Mozambique and then to Angola. The climax of the movie comes when Chamusso returns to South Africa to attempt to finish the job of sabotage he was falsely accused of starting.

Catch a Fire is a credible--and gripping--portrayal of how an ordinary person became radicalized by experiencing the racist brutality of the apartheid state. In that way, Chamusso's story is typical of thousands, even millions, of South Africans in the 1980s, when resistance to apartheid reached its peak.

But there's an important way in which his story is not typical at all, and thus cannot stand as an adequate representation of the fight against apartheid.

His radicalization occurred as an isolated thread--first, when he isolated himself from political action within South Africa, and then, when he intervened from exile. It was inside the country, though, that millions of similar threads were woven together to create the mass resistance that finally brought the system down.

AT THE time of the first attack on the factory Chamusso worked at, most of the national leaders of anti-apartheid organizations were either in prison or exile.

Resistance to the system had revived at the grassroots, first with a series of strikes in the coastal city of Durban in 1973; then in 1976 with the "Soweto rebellion," a revolt of students outside Johannesburg that spread to the rest of the country. Compared to revolts like these, the attacks of MK against economic and military targets were largely symbolic--though inspiring--pinpricks against the system.

Since the mass jailings and exiles of the previous generation, South Africa's society and economy had undergone seismic changes. When Nelson Mandela was sent to Robben Island prison in 1961, the country's urban population was just over 3 million. By 1980, it reached 5.6 million.

The driving force of urbanization was the growth of industry and the Black working class. The cities themselves were kept "white"--they were circled by burgeoning Black "townships" that housed industrial workers, their

families and others who came in search of employment. Soweto, Johannesburg's largest township, grew to more than 1 million.

Townships in surrounding areas were smaller than Soweto, but more industrial. For example, in the East Rand area that stretches between Johannesburg and Secunda, the town where Patrick Chamusso worked, nearly 50 percent of jobs were in mining, manufacturing and construction. The sprawling slum town of Secunda itself was created from scratch in 1974 to house the workers at the state-backed Sasol oil refinery.

In 1982, the government admitted that existing housing stock in the townships met only half the need--a figure that dramatized both the townships' growth and their neglect by the country's white rulers.

The Soweto rebellion of 1976-77, which began with student grievances, quickly zeroed in on a demand that the state recognize township residents--crucial to the economy--as more than "temporary sojourners." Up until then, the apartheid system operated under the fiction that Blacks, the country's original inhabitants, were foreigners as soon as they ventured out of isolated rural areas that whites designated as Black "homelands."

By 1979, Blacks won the right to permanent residence in the townships, although they still could not live in "white" areas.

The next few years were a period of repression combined with reform. Having regained control of the townships by force, the apartheid state sought to stabilize them by building houses, providing electricity and allowing limited "self-rule" through township councils.

BUT PROMISES of houses and electricity ran far ahead of delivery, and the township councils themselves became the focus of popular anger. The councils had "responsibility" but no funding--and therefore no power. They could only raise a budget for services by raising rents. As a result, the councils quickly became seen as just another way that the apartheid state attacked Black workers' living standards.

The activist experience gained in the Soweto rebellion was now channeled in three directions.

In the segregated schools--where Black schools were funded at one-fifteenth the level of white ones--Black students continued to protest substandard conditions. In the neighborhoods, independent "civic organizations" pressured the township councils, with rent boycotts as a key weapon. And in the factories and mines, workers built new unions.

Black unions were legalized in the 1970s following the Durban strikes. From 1980 to 1983, union membership tripled--from 220,000 to 670,000--with one-quarter belonging to the brand-new National Union of Mineworkers. At the Secunda plant, 3,000 people joined the chemical workers' union in the years after Chamusso fled.

Until 1984, most of these struggles had only local consequences, and produced only flashes of militance. This grassroots experience since Soweto, however, prepared the ground for the next confrontation with the apartheid state at the national level--the township uprisings of 1984-86.

Over the summer of 1984, student protests and rent boycotts increased. Then in September, the "Vaal Triangle" exploded. In this industrial region south of Johannesburg, police attacked a crowd of rent boycotters supported by students. The crowd fought back, and went on to attack the homes of two corrupt town councilors. Within days, police killed 50 residents, and protesters killed four councilors.

Elsewhere in the Johannesburg-Pretoria region, home to half of South Africa's population, police began to attack all political gatherings. This repression led to eruptions in the townships nationwide. Town councilors were discredited and sidelined as stooges of apartheid, and the white minority government responded with military occupation.

Workers were involved in the protests in the role of renters or parents, but in November, they took a stand as workers. A political general strike of 800,000 workers, supported by 400,000 students, protested school conditions, but the main demand was the removal of security forces from the townships.

In revenge for the November "stay-away," the Secunda plant fired 6,000 workers, but union action inside and outside the plant restored 70 percent to their jobs--and won recognition of union stewards for the first time.

A year later, 34 unions came together to form COSATU--the Congress of South African Trade Unions. As the movement continued into 1985, many townships became "no-go" areas for South African police.

By the end of 1985, networks of "street committees" began to form the base of genuine township self-rule, including provision of services and dispute-resolution independent of the apartheid system.

Inspiring though this bottom-up democracy was, it never became more than temporary self-rule over slums. To underpin real self-rule, workers would have needed to take over the sources of wealth--the factories and mines. But the apartheid state didn't let things get that far.

Under a state of emergency in 1986, the regime revoked what few civil rights had been gained, and reoccupied the townships.

NATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS played no significant role in the outbreak of the township uprisings, but within the year, a broad grouping called the United Democratic Front (UDF) began to coordinate them.

The UDF was composed of legal organizations to stand in for the banned ANC, plus church, union and other groups that were willing to work with the ANC. Its initial task in 1983 was a successful boycott of elections to the new "Indian" and "Colored" branches of parliament--a failed attempt by the apartheid rulers to divide the opposition to apartheid.

Although most UDF affiliates started with no roots where township struggles broke out, the UDF embraced the revolts and helped sharpen their national focus. The enthusiasm of this broad grouping even extended to the experiments with street committees and "people's courts"--the new structures of authority, built from the bottom up, that served as glimpses of a democratic alternative to the crushing authority of the apartheid state.

But as state repression set in during the late 1980s, both the apartheid rulers and ANC-aligned forces looked for a "settlement" of the social stalemate. They both envisioned negotiations--and a post-apartheid system--that would be engineered from the top down.

By this time, COSATU had fallen in behind the ANC's lead, passing up a chance to form the beginnings of an independent workers' party. Communist Party activists formed the glue between the two, declaring that workers' power and socialism could come only after a period of non-racial capitalist democracy.

As the ANC bargained on behalf of the whole movement, it would not settle for any remaining trace of legalized racism, and the apartheid rulers would not yield the economic position of those who owned the mines, factories and farms.

In the end, even the compromise that brought Nelson Mandela to the presidency in 1994 would have been impossible without repeated eruptions of action from below. The two crucial popular interventions in the early 1990s were the overthrow of Lucas Mangope, the stooge ruler of the Bophuthatswana "homeland," and the mass protests that broke out after far-right wingers assassinated Communist Party leader Chris Hani.

The outcome was a victory over a grotesque racist system--but not over inequality or mass poverty. The scenes of endless rows of shacks in *Catch a Fire* did not have to be staged. They reflect a reality that has persisted to this day.

There is still a way out of this reality--a renewal of the mass struggle that is hinted at, but not explored, in *Catch a Fire*. To secure a renewal of bottom-up rule, workers will need to organize themselves independently as a political force to control the sources of South Africa's wealth.