

the class struggle in south africa 1976-80

South Africa reveals not the excesses of global Power, but its brutal naked truth. Liberalism & Stalinism, the 2 major lies of hierarchical power throughout the world, fuse, in South Africa, into one: black Mozambique marxists shake hands with white racists... whilst strikes, riots and all forms of anti-hierarchical violence are crushed with increasingly similar manipulations and naked State violence in every country throughout the world. Against the global choice between shit & diarrhoea, the South African proletariat is showing the quickest pathway to progress: the tangled pathway of total negativity - doubting everything and enforcing this doubt - forgiving nothing and forgetting even less... Those who are officially the most unskilled are today at the forefront of the struggle to make specialization obsolete... From Mansfield to Soweto, from Toxteth to Gdansk, from Warrington to Caen, from Effra Parade to Johannesburg a new world explodes as the proletariat puts its desperate doubts on the map, in the streets, in the global critique of daily survival...

"...in South Africa normal national or ruling-class behaviour is rendered uniquely controversial by the colour dimension..." - Peregrine Worsthorne, right-wing assistant editor of the Sunday Telegraph, 13/5/84.

"...what was combatted was not, as the conservative whites would like to believe, purely racial inequities, but the social system based on the domination of commodities, which flourishes in South Africa by means of racial divisions." - Chris Shutes, commenting on the uprisings of '76 - '77 in "On The Poverty Of Berkeley Life..."

"It's like South Africa working here" - Cowley BL worker during the wildcat washing-up strike.

"We should shoot them down - like they do in Soweto" - W.P.C. overheard commenting to her fellow male cop about the Brixton riots, April 1981.

"We would like to make it clear to the outside world that we will get whatever we want, and that whatever we want we will get. If possible we will use violence... If possible. Because by sitting around a table and talking about these things with the whites brings no good future to us. It's just like talking to a stone. Now by violence they will understand a little of what we say - a little. Now by war they will understand everything - by war." - A young Soweto black quoted in the revolutionary video, *Call It Sleep*.

"The school for the oppressed is a revolution."

—Soweto pamphlet, 1976

The manner in which the violent uprisings that swept South Africa in 1976/77 have been defined by the international spectacular society and its pseudo-opposition exposes their willful determination to misinterpret, misrepresent, and misunderstand what was a decisive event in the history of proletarian struggle in that country. Everything emanating from established circles—from the Nat regime in South Africa to the racist white man or woman on a Johannesburg street and from the African National Congress and the Pan Africanist Congress (ANC and PAC) to pseudo-oppositional leftists the world over—has not only undermined but also distorted the events that occurred in South Africa.

For a start; what happened in South Africa cannot be encapsulated in alienated notions of time and space. It was not isolated to June of 1976. It was not restricted to Soweto. It was not merely the act of students. Nor was it simply a revolt, rebellion or unrest. It was creative revolution in the making, in the desperately clear moment of confrontation.

The events that shook the entire edifice of white South Africa, and threw into stark relief the notion of total revolution, began with relative inconspicuousness. A group of Soweto junior high school students at a single school protested the use of Afrikaans (the official language of the oppressors) as a medium of instruction. The revolt of high school students against the enforcement of learning in the Boer language was significant in itself. It marked, from the outset, a highly advanced struggle to the extent that it was a rejection of the colonisation of consciousness which triggered off the insurrection, even when so many other material reasons for resistance existed.

Initially, however, the Soweto student protest followed the traditional defeatist lines of oppositional politics: the students boycotted classes. But in a community such as Soweto, where any contestation immediately brings down upon itself the entire repressive apparatus, symbolic protest cannot be contained to the symbol, but must overflow into the realm of real struggle. For a community that is all too well acquainted with lumpen criminality and

with unrelenting brutality on a daily basis, violence is always a ready-at-hand implement to pit against the contradictions of daily life. The striking students were no exception. Not for them the "ponderous" problem of morality and constraint. A teacher who ignored student demands was stabbed by screwdriver-wielding youths. Police were stoned. Two government officials were killed by a young man from Soweto.

In a matter of days the students had gained the support of their parents, and had coerced the teachers into backing their demands. The authorities still refused to concede. Afrikaans remained as a medium of instruction.

At this point the confrontation between the students and the state (in the institutionalised form of the school) was contained to, at the most, a handful of campuses. How was the transformation made so that these grievances ignited the fury of all black South Africa? Those who sought the answer in the form of an effective and extensive centralised organisation—be they the South African state on the search for scapegoats, or the international humanitarian conscience on the search for superstars—were in for a rude surprise. (Eventually the South African state was able to fabricate its scapegoats whom the international opposition were then able to turn into superstars. Thus symbiotically, the state and its pseudo-opposition succeeded in fooling themselves and almost everybody else except the real participants in the struggle, by recreating the events that began on June 16, in their own image.)

But there were no leaders—only a handful of militant individuals (prior to June 16), inspired by their frustration in the face of unyielding authority, who with the help of friends set out to organise something, the content of which, let alone the consequences, they were in no position to anticipate.

A group of students from Orlando West Junior High School—the first school to boycott classes—and some of their friends from other schools such as Morris Isaacson High School—as yet unaffected by the Afrikaans issue—arranged a general demonstration in protest of the state's design to use the language of the oppressor as a language of instruction.

Once again the tactics, the form of protest—a demonstration—was a symbolic one, albeit more dangerous, since demonstrations of any kind in South Africa are, by statute, punishable offences. The organisers of the demonstration—the embryo of a later-to-be self-proclaimed leadership—proceeded to visit all local schools to gather support.

The response of the Soweto students who attended that demonstration on June 16 far exceeded the expectations of the organisers. As opposed to the anticipated couple of thousand demonstrators expected by the organisers, about 30,000 students gathered at Orlando West High School.

The placards carried by those gathered already portended things to come. There were slogans not only denouncing Afrikaans and Bantu Education, but such slogans as: "Power," "Smash the system," "Away with Vorster," "We'll fight until total liberation."

In festive mood the students took their protest to the streets. Inevitably they were confronted by the brute force of the South African state, who, by ruse of history, understood the implications of the students' actions even more clearly than most of the students themselves were able to at that time. Without warning the police opened fire on the singing and marching students. The students at the front of the procession began to retreat, but their flight was halted by the act of one person. One young woman stood her ground, then defiantly walked towards the police shouting: "Shoot me!" Inspired by this incredible act—so incredible that the police did not shoot—the students' retreat turned into a regroupment and frenzied counterattack. Rocks were torn from the ground and hurled at the police. After a second volley of shots had left more students dead and wounded, the leadership suddenly reappeared, in the form of one Tsietso Mashinini, who stood up on an overturned vehicle and exhorted his fellow students to disperse. He was promptly forced to scuttle when the students turned their rocks on him. While the leadership was thus "left in the bush part three," so was their newfound style of contestation—demonstration; for the students did disperse, not to seek refuge at home from "inevitable" suicide, as the self-proclaimed leadership had urged, but to rampage through the streets of Soweto in a potlatch of destruction.

Within days spontaneous rioting had broken out in every major area of the country. The South African blacks launched a vicious attack on apartheid, commodities and state power. The original grievance was quickly superseded, not because it was insignificant, but because the extremity of the insurrection put everything else in question along with it.

By August 1976, the white state was being forced to retreat on all fronts.

* Almost all schools had been attacked and many had been burnt down. The students were in almost daily confrontation with the police.

- Almost every beerhall in the black townships had been razed to the ground.

- Collaborators within the townships had been severely attacked. Not a single "respectable" black community figure was able to come forward as mediator.

- High school students and young "ex-thugs" prevented workers from going to work in Johannesburg, threatening taxi-drivers, blocking trains and sabotaging railroads. Workers quickly responded, and even after coercion had abated, strikes in Johannesburg and in Cape Town were 80-100% effective.* Some of the workers who went to work went, not because they were intimidated by the system, but in order to sabotage white-owned technology and commodities.

- Coloureds and Indians had been drawn into the struggle, thus bridging an historical gap among the oppressed that had existed for generations.

- The Bophutatswana (a government-created black "homeland") houses of parliament had been razed to the ground. All government appointed black leaders were in danger of losing their lives. Many lost their houses.

- Numerous black policemen had fled the townships. Several were killed. After nightfall one-time "lumpen criminals" joined with students and workers to attend to community needs.

- The worker stay-aways drew the adult population into the struggle. Before then they would leave to work in the white cities in the early morning and return after nightfall, while the students squared off against the state. During the stay-aways, the workers were drawn into the confrontation, being forced by the sheer magnitude of the bitter struggle to join the youth in their battle against the system.

For the remainder of 1976 and through to June of 1977, violence continued across the country. Within four months of June 16, about two hundred black communities had been swept along by the tide of revolution. Major areas like Soweto, Guguletu, New Brighton, etc, are still shaken at times by new revolts.

Let the moralists and the humanitarians pretend the students were always peace-loving, and mere victims of the violence. The

* The heeding of the call for a general strike marked a qualitative leap in the struggle, not because the workers became the vanguard of the revolt, but because strike action had as its target not only direct oppressors, but the whole commodity system. Most left-wing specialists draw attention to the percentage of worker participation, which was always high. This draws attention away from what in fact people were striking for. Not a single economic demand was enunciated. The strikers had nothing to ask of their masters and they knew it.

events in South Africa have exploded that insipid myth. In a situation in which state violence is institutionalised on such an overwhelming scale, one affirms one's humanity not by "turning the other cheek" and suffering with dignity, but by willfully and consciously accepting one's share of violence and by understanding that brute systematic force can only be destroyed by the creative violence of the masses.

In June 1977 the executive of a student organisation, whose credibility as a vanguard emerged out of the hero and/or agitator seeking of the South African press, was detained by the South African police. The recent trial of these individuals along with a great many others of the same type are important to note, for by means of these sham efforts of justice the South African state has attempted to delineate in time a quasi-official ending to the period of open class struggle in South Africa. The logic is: *arrest the leaders, arrest the revolution*. This official self-delusion of the state is mimicked by many of its opponents in exile. The exile's lament, in spite of his real anguish and homesickness, his glum belief that "the revolution has been suppressed again," is pitifully vacuous. It is designed only to convince his listeners that despite his present passivity he remains committed to a struggle in which his past participation is often very dubious anyway.

But the struggle has not been suppressed as is witnessed by the consistent reports of unrest and sporadic violence in the South African press. Such events *underline* the ongoing ferment that sustains the revolutionary spirit from day to day throughout South Africa.

This is a reproduction of the first part of 'Reflections On The Black Consciousness Movement and the South African Revolution', written by Selby Semela, Sam Thompson and Norman Abraham, produced in August 1979. The original text is available c/o po box 4644, Berkeley, California 94704, U.S.A. A photocopy is available from B.M.Combustion, London WC1N 3XX for 40p.

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The South African Movement In 1980

The following is taken from 'ON THE POVERTY OF BERKELEY LIFE and the Marginal Stratum of American Society in General' (pp.47-52), written by Chris Shutes in May 1983, po box 4502, Berkeley, CA 94704, U.S.A.

The South African insurrections of 1980, virtually across the board, marked advances and extensions of the positions of '76, of the consciousness of the rebels and of the forms of struggle deployed in the assault on the South African State.

The South African "Soweto student revolt" of 1976—which in any case was not limited to Soweto, students or 1976—is fairly widely known and recognized, to the point where it has attained, in widely disparate circles, the status of a landmark in international revolution, and is spoken of with all the reverence and due spirit of holy affirmation appropriate to all the latter-day gurus of the left.* What is truly remarkable is not the affirmation of '76, but the fact that, for whatever reasons, the bourgeois press has enjoyed a quasi-total monopoly in discussing subsequent South African developments, notably the insurrections of 1980 which, virtually across the board, marked *advances and extensions* of the positions of '76, of the consciousness of the rebels and of the forms of struggle deployed in the assault on the South African State.

Whereas one of the first issues confronted in 1976 was the relation of the so-called "Asians" (people predominantly of Indian descent) and "coloureds" (people of mixed race, often of Malay descent) to the rebellion of "Africans," the events of 1980 *began* among one of the social groups previously considered to be of dubious loyalty: the coloureds, who "enjoy" a marginally superior position in the South African hierarchy vis-a-vis the people of native African descent. The initial skirmishes took the form of a strike by coloured students in the Cape Province, in protest of the huge disparity between the money spent on their schools and that spent for the education of whites. Many Indians quickly took up the struggle, which earned them a massive repression in their town-

* There is an obvious falsification involved in the left's efforts to present '76 as compatible with their own goals and methods. This has been discussed extensively in the pamphlet, "Reflections on the Black Consciousness Movement and the South African Revolution," available from me.

ships; the "Africans," though apparently suspicious at first, soon became involved to the point where, in most areas, they were the principal combatants. That which in the 1970's had been a key issue of theoretical struggle on the part of the partisans of "Black Consciousness"—namely, the reorientation of all non-white people towards a positive and unified self-definition as *black*—became a practical banality, no longer a goal but a point of departure. **

In the social tumult of '76-'77, contestation in South Africa was largely confined, perforce, to black areas. It is shortsighted and in fact racist to maintain that the struggles of this earlier period were limited to "symbolic" gestures against the dominant society; there is nothing symbolic about the social function of South African township beer halls, golf courses, schools, stores, houses of sell-outs or police stations (all of which and more were attacked in that period). The acts so callously described by white assholes as "preying on their own kind" demonstrated above all the *class* consciousness of the rebels; what was combatted was not, as the conservative whites would like to believe, purely racial inequities, but the social system based on the domination of commodities, which flourishes in South Africa *by means of* racial divisions.

However, the strategic necessity of attacking the society on the enemy's terrain remains, and it was just here that the rebellion of 1980 saw its first decisive leap. In late May, some 3,000 coloured people, mostly young, staged a sit-down protest in the heart of downtown Cape Town; which predictably became, given the mentality of the South African police, a street battle between protestors and cops. Before the tumult had subsided several months later, one had also seen the burning of a building in Bellville (white, though formerly coloured, suburb of Cape Town), an act which went a long way in promoting a generalized feeling of siege among whites in the traditionally "liberal" southern port-resort.

Whereas in 1976-'77, a nascent black bureaucracy—the Soweto Students Representative Council (SSRC)—was in part able to dominate and mediate the activities of South African rebels with a certain credibility, in 1980 the nascent student leadership was forced to retreat into the woodwork at a fairly early stage. In early June, the initial organization of coloured student leaders (the "Committee of 81," centered in the Western Cape), openly dissolved itself: "The students Committee of 81, which co-ordinated the boycott, said the protest was not having any effect and urged a return to classrooms" (*S.F. Chronicle*, 6-6-80). Whether it was a matter here of chickening out, or whether it was a matter of tactically recognizing that to continue would only invite State repression, is academic. The practical point is that the situation itself had no place for this committee; far from flagging at this point, the student strike continued to grow, and the effects provided by its initial impetus spread

** Thus when I speak of "blacks" I mean not only people of native African descent, which is the definition put forward by the National Party in order to play one group off against the others, but "Africans," "coloureds" and "Asians."

throughout black society, both geographically and in the extension of the struggle far beyond the student terrain.

The attempts of the African National Congress (ANC) to interject its own careerist leadership aspirations into the struggle were even more ineffectual. Long since left without a practical power base within the country, the ANC has survived as a *strictly exile* organization, largely through the support of Moscow (lacking such support, the Pan-Africanist Congress and other exile splinter groups exist today mostly in name only). The ANC's notorious recruitment policies in southern Africa among exiles fresh out of the townships at home has little to do with its ideology as a classic Leninist-nationalist "liberation organization" (an ideology completely inappropriate to South Africa's developed economy and *modern proletariat*, and whose tactical orientation is frankly idiotic). The ANC has rather induced a fair number of exiles into obeisance simply because many exiles have nowhere else to go in order to survive. For those in the organization's camps who begin to doubt the promise of a glorious return, a ruthless military discipline is deployed to keep them quiet (in this regard, the Stalinists of the ANC are the worthy heirs of the National Party, which had its origins in the explicitly *anti-imperialist* Afrikaner movement of the '20s).

When, on June 1, 1980, ANC commandos bombed two South African oil refineries, they generated a lot of press, and doubtless a fair amount of fear on the part of whites and an equally fair amount of passive approval on the part of blacks. The course of the struggle was perhaps momentarily stalled while everyone pondered what came next, but simply continued from its own momentum and development, with the fireworks eclipsed from memory, if not forgotten.

Only the *authorities* maintained the posture that the struggles that developed were the work of professionals or "outside agitators," whether communist or even American (!) inspired. This was as predictable as the labelling of rioters as "criminal elements," a simple reflex on the part of Power which knows well the degree of hatred and bitterness felt by the majority of South African blacks, but which must nonetheless feed the mill of deliberate self-delusion on the part of the majority of South African whites. One reformist member of Parliament, Dr. Frederik van Zyl Slabbert, was more candid: "The police find themselves in an almost impossible situation. They have to maintain law and order and prevent anarchy and looting in a community that finds itself in a political vacuum" (*Chronicle*, 6-19-80).

In the period from May through July, the following exemplary acts had taken place in South Africa:

—A black adult who addressed a meeting of student strikers, seeking to convince the students to call off their boycott, was stoned to death in Port Elizabeth.

—A white cop was stabbed to death in the township of Elsies River, outside Cape Town.

— A black cop was set afire in Bloemfontein.

— A cop was stabbed in the Onverwacht township near Bloemfontein after a police station was overrun by blacks. The crowd of 600 wrapped up the evening looting stores and burning cars.

— June 16, the anniversary of the beginning of the uprising of '76, was marked by a very successful worker stay-away in the Cape Town area, and by huge gatherings of people in the Cape Flats townships, in spite of a police ban on meetings of ten or more persons. By the 18th, the Cape Flats were a battle zone. At least forty-two and perhaps as many as sixty persons were shot to death by police, with hundreds injured, mostly by bullets. Countless businesses were looted and/or burned; several schools and at least two factories were torched; roads were barricaded, at one point cutting off Malan airport from Cape Town, and passing vehicles were destroyed. Needless to say, fire crews, police and whites in general were not well received in these areas.

— Simultaneous to the warfare in the Cape Flats, a strike wave broke out in Eastern Cape cities, notably Port Elizabeth and Uitenhage, centers of South Africa's auto industry. Beginning at the Volkswagen factory and spreading eventually to about a dozen other plants, black workers demanding a 70 percent wage increase and other concessions bypassed the official union structure (which immediately called for a return to work). In a remarkable show of solidarity, workers stayed out for three weeks until their demands were largely met, in spite of having foreign-based strike funds cut off by the government. The South African Army was called in to protect plants in Uitenhage; on several occasions police used dogs, tear gas and buckshot to break up groups of strikers near their workplaces.

It should be noted that the student boycott continued for months after the major incidents of May-July; a large number of students simply never bothered to go back to school at all.

The decisive involvement of workers in the South African struggle, an involvement which has increased in importance since 1980, clearly has South Africa's rulers very worried indeed, as shown for example by the emphasis given by the Security Police in the past two years to curtailing the activities of black unionists and other radical workers. When in early 1982 a young white unionist, Dr. Neil Aggett, died while in police detention, some thirty to forty thousand black workers immediately staged a brief work stoppage in protest. Far from being a matter of a softening attitude among blacks towards the typical forms of white opposition—almost invariably feeble expressions of a guilty conscience at having their way of life so *obviously* based on the victimization of blacks—this action should rather be seen as one more example of the developing consciousness among black workers of the class nature of their oppression, and of their struggle.

As in the case of the Stalinist bloc, one cannot judge unions in the South African context with the same criteria as one does the union rackets in the industrially developed West (with the obvious exception that the official unions

maintained by the government in selected industries, run mostly by whites and always for whites, richly deserve such contempt). The new "autonomous" black unions in South Africa have, rather, a much less clearly defined role in the class battle array. Though they tend to center their activities on reformist issues, many of their apparently reformist demands are at least implicit attacks on the entire social structure. Demands which often call for doubling or even trebling wages, for instance, challenge the foundation of cheap labor without which white South Africa and its modern economy could not survive. Almost invariably, strikes focus, at least in part, on racial restrictions in job availability which keep black workers largely in unskilled and therefore replaceable positions. Black workers, moreover, are clearly aware that much more is at stake in each skirmish than a few motley reforms, which is doubtless the main reason that most who become involved pay attention in the first place. Further, the union form is frequently the only available means by which black workers can more or less openly take a political stand, serving as a *de facto* forum of proletarian expression as well as an albeit thin buffer of protection that makes united action possible.

On the other hand, the new South African unions present possibilities for a new conservatism. The problem, or potential for problems, lies not so much in the likelihood of the solidification of union hierarchies, for the government can be expected to remove from circulation any individuals who stand out as too effective, powerful or popular (as the Aggett case showed, not even whites are exempt from this). Rather, the possible source of the creation of a certain social equilibrium—which, even if temporary, can only work to the profit of the system—posed by the unions consists in the fact that the very form of struggle they promote could tend to mediate and circumscribe the struggles of the most industrialized sector of the South African proletariat. As with any labor union, the tension always exists between "realistic" demands and ultimate goals; between the immediate situation of the organized segment of the workers and the interests of the working class as a whole; in short, whether the union becomes something to protect and conserve, its existence secured at the price of moderation, of limiting the scope of its actions and concerns to more or less classical industrial action, however "militant." It is worth noting in this context that a certain "enlightened" sector of South African capital wants to see black unions gain legal status, preferring to deal with a predictable organization rather than an "anarchic" assembly of workers. Largely due to pressure from this sector, unions in many areas have been granted a *de facto* legal existence, and in a few cases are recognized as parties to labor contracts.

There is admittedly a great deal that mitigates against the black unions becoming petrified institutions, above and beyond governmental resistance. The massive reserve labor pool in South Africa, bolstered by the atrocious "homelands" scheme of the government, makes the withholding of one's labor a very tenuous weapon. It is entirely possible, often probable, for the government to simply fire the workers of entire industries, ship them wholesale to the home-

lands (in the case of "Africans"), and bus in from the homelands or elsewhere new recruits who are likely to be unaware of the entire situation (as was done, for example, in the 1980 strike of Johannesburg transport workers). Further, the efforts of the government to more explicitly stratify nascent class divisions within the black population are well known and understood: any sort of development of an "aristocracy of labor" is bound to be seen as playing into the hands of the whites, selling one's soul for the altogether dubious "privilege" of slightly better pay and permanent residence in urban townships. Finally, any sort of credence given by whites to unions—even (if not especially) by liberal whites who would of course like to see issues of black and white obscured by a nice Western style union organizing drive in which they or at least their children could play a modest part—only leads to the question, "What are we doing wrong?"

Developments in South Africa overwhelm all accounting. That which would cause headlines in most countries is often, in South Africa, so commonplace that it scarcely qualifies as news.

South Africa today is the most clearly polarized country in the world. Not only is society divided into two parts, but those who know they must do away with the system, though their methods are very understandably unclear, have fewer illusions about their situation than do their counterparts anywhere else. Why do South African Blacks, to take but one example, refuse, with violence if possible, to occupy the new, "improved" townships that the government so generously offers from time to time? Because they know that every reform is repaid a thousand times over in that fundamental currency, social control. In spite of often the direst material poverty, the inflation rate that commands foremost attention is the rate of humiliation.

"South Africa: a world in one country," touts a Johannesburg tourist calendar. South Africa reveals not the excesses of global Power, but its naked and brutal truth. Liberalism and stalinism, the two principal forms of geopolitical domination, fuse, in South Africa, into one; permeating each other and together the society, they reveal their common rotten core. Bureaucrats in power world-wide wish that South Africa would fall into the Indian Ocean. Short of a proletarian revolution elsewhere—always *the* essential form of international solidarity—South African rebels can in the foreseeable future expect no appreciable assistance from outside, least of all from the "front line" southern African States supposedly hostile to their southern neighbor but in fact dominated by its economy. It is rather the South African proletariat that is showing the world the pathway towards progress. And progress for them can only mean continuing the adventure of total negativity; doubting everything and enforcing this doubt; forgiving nothing and forgetting even less. Those who are officially the most unskilled are today at the forefront of the struggle to make specialization obsolete.

All this world is like a ghetto called Soweto.

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