



Black youths arrested for going into a 'white' area

Socialism and the struggle for freedom

The best-known programme in the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa is the Freedom Charter, published in 1955. It was produced by an alliance of the African National Congress, the South African Indian Congress, the South African Coloured People's Congress, and the white Congress of Democrats.

Liberal

The Charter has been criticised within the movement, mostly by more 'black-nationalist' groups like the Pan-Africanist Congress which split from the ANC in 1959 and the present-day black consciousness organisations. The critiques see the Charter as a white liberal document, and counterpose to it a range of politics varying from anti-white exclusively African nationalism to revolutionary socialism.

The PAC defined its aim as "government of the Africans by the Africans, and for the Africans, with everybody who owes his only loyalty to Africa and is prepared to accept the democratic rule of the African majority being regarded as African".

However, the Freedom Charter remains the best-known programme. The Freedom Charter essentially calls for

democracy in South Africa: a government 'based on the will of the people'; a democratic state; equal rights for all regardless of race, colour, sex or belief; an administration in which 'all people will be entitled to take part'; the abolition of all racist and apartheid laws and practices; due process under law; freedom of speech and organisation; the right to trade union organisation; social security, education and health care available for all; the land to be shared among those who work it; the reserves to be abolished; the people to share in the country's wealth; the right to trade guaranteed; the mines, banks and large industries to be nationalised.

Social democracy

It said nothing about socialism and its model was something not that different from West European social democracy.

The Communist Party endorsed this programme on the basis of a 'two stage' theory of revolution. The first stage was to be purely democratic; after democracy had been won, the second stage was to consist in the transition to socialism. In the first stage all democratic forces could

unite together against apartheid; the working class struggle for socialism was put off into the future.

To give this theory a more radical appearance, the CP has also argued that the working class has a leading role in the first stage, and that this first stage is not simply capitalist democracy but some 'non-capitalist' road of development.

Denied

In reaction against this two-stage theory, some socialists have denied any independent status to the race question at all.

Reacting also against liberal capitalist views which see apartheid as an aberration totally contrary to the logic of capitalism, they have argued that apartheid is absolutely indispensable to capitalism in South Africa. Apartheid and capitalism are so closely intertwined that the only real struggle against apartheid is the working-class struggle for socialism.

They have criticised the Freedom Charter basically for sowing the illusion that democracy is possible in South Africa short of socialist revolution.

This perspective ignores the fact that



Heavily armed railway police

race is a crucial basis of oppression in South Africa and that no amount of theoretical sophistry will dissolve it into the contradictions of 'capital itself'. All blacks, as blacks, do have an interest in the overthrow of the apartheid state; apartheid is often the most pressing form of oppression felt by blacks; and black workers can ally with other blacks in common opposition to apartheid and they would be foolish to ignore this opportunity for common action.

Alliance

Those socialists who deny this cut themselves off not only from this possibility of alliance between workers and other democrats; they also cut themselves off from the working class itself which is reminded every day — by Pass Laws, white police, colour bars etc — that the achievement of political liberty and the overthrow of apartheid is their *own* immediate goal as well.

The struggle for socialism is *not* the only struggle in South Africa for black workers. They want trade union rights, political suffrage, freedom of movement, access to all jobs regardless of race, equality before the law, the end of despotic laws and so forth. Socialists who have failed to recognise this end up necessarily in the most arid sectarianism.

An alternative socialist reaction against the 'two stage' theory of the Communist Party has been to declare that the Freedom Charter is a socialist programme in that it sets out to nationalise the com-

manding heights of industry. This is nonsense; nationalisation is not necessarily socialism, and in South Africa state ownership in industry has always been extensive. Some 58% of South Africa's fixed capital stock is state-owned.

The other version of this argument is that the Freedom Charter is effectively socialist because, though formally it demands nothing not possible under capitalism, in practice it could not be realised short of socialism. But a socialist programme is not just, or even mainly, a list of measures too radical to be accommodated by capitalism. It is a comprehensive explanation of how society can be transformed by the working class.

Whatever its merits as a democratic programme, the Freedom Charter is certainly not socialist.

Declamatory

The more serious criticism of the Freedom Charter is that — considered as a democratic programme — it is not sufficiently democratic.

It is declamatory, failing to link its general principles to immediate demands. It says almost nothing about the democratic rights of women.

And the Congress Alliance was explicitly *not* non-racial; it was rather multi-racial. It expressed an alliance based on distinct racially defined groupings: African, Indian, Coloured and European, who came together in order to fight the common enemy of apartheid. Each of the

organisations involved concentrated on and represented their own particular racial grouping.

This multi-racial conception was clearly expressed in Point Two of the Freedom Charter:

"All national groups shall have equal rights. There shall be equal status in the bodies of the state, in the courts and in the schools for all national groups and races; all national groups shall be protected by law against insults to their race and national pride; all people shall have equal rights to use their own language and to develop their own folk culture and customs; the preaching and practice of national, race or colour discrimination and contempt shall be a punishable crime; all apartheid laws and practices shall be set aside."

This multi-racialism has been the subject of much debate in the liberation movement. The principal problem with the Charter lies not with what it includes, but with what it leaves out. It is quite correct that the rights of different groupings in South Africa should be protected by a democratic government; any kind of discrimination on the grounds of race or nationality would be entirely unacceptable.

Racial

But the democratic goal is to do away with racial categories altogether, that is, to achieve a society in which racial identification plays no part. There is no trace of this democratic aspiration in the Charter and in this it reflects the racial basis of the Alliance which formed the Charter.

The Communist Party based itself on the 'lifeless, logic chopping interpretation of Stalin's definition of nation'. No Sizwe quotes the 'unadulterated liberal bourgeois conclusion' reached by the USSR theorist Potehkin: "Today in South Africa the process of forming two national societies continues, that of the Bantu and of the Anglo-Afrikaner. There are no grounds for assuming that one nation can be formed which would embrace the Bantu, the Coloureds and the Anglo-Afrikaners. The Coloureds could not at this time become a component part of the national Bantu group, they do not know the Bantu languages and in language, cultural forms and self-consciousness they tend to identify themselves with the Anglo-Afrikaners. The Indians are completely a separate group." (No Sizwe, 'One Azania, one nation', p.98).

The lack of democratic perspective diverted attention away from the question of the class character and class leadership of the alliance. Rather than appearing as what it was — an alliance between different classes of the oppressed it appeared as an alliance of different racial groupings under the dominance of the majority race, the Africans. The class question was buried beneath the surface.

The burial of class issues in the Freedom Charter meant the isolation of democratic aspirations from the immediate social demands of the black working class.

The Charter abstracts its vision of a future democratic South Africa from any class content. What this means in practice is not the actual elimination of class issues, but the subordination of those things which are most important to workers to forces outside the working class.

This issue of democratic struggle and socialist struggle has been discussed before, notably among Russian Marxists

before and around 1917. Though the specific circumstances are very different, the general method used by Marxists in Russia can be illuminating for South Africa.

The Russian Marxists faced a capitalist society; but not just any capitalist society. Russia was under the semi-feudal rule of the Tsar (Emperor) and his nobility and bureaucracy.

Some people thought that the growth of capitalist industry would almost automatically lead to capitalist liberalism overthrowing Tsarism. At some point after that first stage would come a second stage in which the working class overthrew capitalist liberalism.

Lenin and Trotsky rejected that view. While being willing to ally with the liberals for any real struggle, they placed no faith in them at all. The liberals' hostility to Tsarism was much more feeble than their fear of the working class.

So Trotsky (and eventually Lenin)

looked to a working-class revolution to overthrow Tsarism.

But that perspective did not mean neglecting the democratic, 'anti-Tsarist' issues, or dissolving them into a general socialist programme. On the contrary: land to the peasants, a Constituent Assembly, an eight-hour day, were the leading slogans.

Trotsky argued that the working class could and should take the lead on the basis of those democratic slogans. But it would do so according to the tempo and the logic of the class struggle, not of any abstract scheme. Direct class issues would intertwine with the democratic issues at each turn. When the working class triumphed, it could do so only on the basis of its own programme: working class rule, public ownership of industry.

While fighting for this perspective, Trotsky did not deny other possibilities. It was possible that the working class, having smashed the old order, would see its

victory confiscated by the bourgeoisie and turned into a merely 'democratic' revolution. It was conceivable that the ruling class — spurred on by, and attempting to pre-empt, revolt from below — would transform the system from above, albeit in a limited, bureaucratic, way.

Likewise in South Africa. South African capitalism's profits are based on the system which reduces black people to cheap labour devoid of rights. If progress depends on the feeble proposals made every so often by South African big business for some liberalisation, then it will be a very long time indeed coming. South African capital needs the racist system.

But capital does not always get what it needs. The black workers are and must be the driving force of the struggle against white supremacy; they will conduct that struggle by the rhythms and methods appropriate to their own class interests, combining it with their own direct class demands, and fighting for a victory which will merge a democratic and a socialist revolution. But it would be a mistake to underestimate the flexibility of capitalism.

That mistake was already made by many South African leftists in the 1970s, when they underestimated the new non-racial unions or condemned them as 'economistic' and 'reformist' because they thought that the apartheid state could not possibly allow genuine non-racial unions to exist for any time at all.

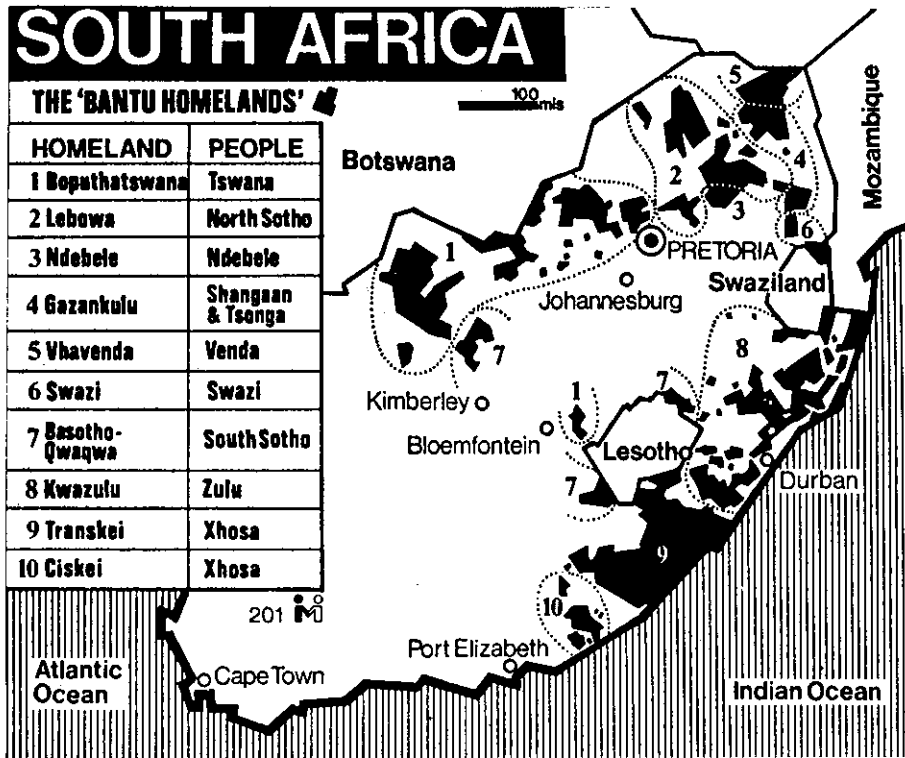
The state did not tolerate the unions out of generosity. But it was forced to let them develop.

There are a number of possibilities now other than socialist revolution or total defeat.

Since the 1970s especially a small but real middle class has developed in the black townships.

The overthrow of white supremacy could be followed by the black middle class establishing their rule and suppressing the black workers. Or, under extreme pressure, the white regime might reform itself drastically and manage to stabilise that reformed version by use of repression.

Both the CP theory of 'two stages' and the scholastic theory of socialist revolution or nothing fail to grasp the reality of what is happening now or the range of possible outcomes.



A black republic

In this extract from a letter to South African comrades, Leon Trotsky discussed the 'two-stage' strategy for South Africa, and the slogan of a Black Republic. (From Trotsky's 'Writings', 1934-5).

The South African possessions of Great Britain form a dominion only from the point of view of the white minority. From the point of the black majority, South Africa is a slave colony.

No social upheaval (in the first instance, an agrarian revolution) is thinkable with the retention of British imperialism in the South African dominion. The overthrow of British imperialism in South Africa is just as indispensable for the triumph of socialism in South Africa as it is for Great Britain itself.

If, as it is possible to assume, the revol-

ution will start first in Great Britain, the less support the British bourgeoisie will find in the colonies and dominions, including so important a possession as South Africa, the quicker will be their defeat at home. The struggle for the expulsion of British imperialism, its tools and agents thus enters as an indispensable part of the programme of the South African proletarian party.

The overthrow of the hegemony of British imperialism in South Africa can come about as the result of a military defeat of

Great Britain and the disintegration of the empire. In this case, the South African whites could still, for a certain period — hardly a considerable one — retain their domination over the blacks.

Another possibility, which in practice could be connected with the first, is a revolution in Great Britain and her possessions. Three-quarters of the population of South Africa (almost six million of the almost eight million total) is composed of non-Europeans. A victorious revolution is unthinkable without the awakening of the native masses. In its turn, that will give them what they are so lacking today — confidence in their strength, a heightened personal consciousness, a cultural growth.

Under these conditions, the South Afri-