



The flag of the ANC

The Freedom Charter: myth and reality

Over the last few years the African National Congress has started to play a more open role in the struggle in South Africa than it has done for decades. Central to this development has been the increased prominence of the ANC's historic document, the Freedom Charter. In this article BOB FINE takes issue with those, like a recent writer in the 'African Communist', who seek to idealise the Charter and its history.

With the rise of the independent trade union movement and the more general growth of political consciousness among black workers, the question of what political programme the working class needs and wants to carry forward its struggles has come to the fore.

The African National Congress and the Communist Party have stood firmly by the Freedom Charter as their political manifesto, and no one can doubt that the Freedom Charter has won considerable popular support as a vision of a democratic alternative to apartheid. In a context in which thoroughly undemocratic alternatives to apartheid are being proposed by some 'reforming' elements of big business and the state, the Freedom Charter retains its significance as a democratic manifesto demanding one person, one vote in a unitary South African state.

Within the workers' movement, however, there has been criticism from various quarters that the Freedom Charter fails to provide an adequate direction for the struggle. The political content of the Charter has been criticised both for ambiguities running through it and for its omissions on various critical issues.

While it supports 'one person, one vote', it makes no mention of rights of political organisation or of inter-party democracy. While it supports the deracialisation of the state apparatus, it makes no mention of terminating the vast powers of the executive and army over social and political life. While it supports the right of trade union organisation, it says nothing of the right to strike. While it supports the transfer of the wealth of the mines and monopoly industries to the people, it says nothing about what form this transfer is to take. It commits itself to the redivision of the land, but offers no clue about what direction this will take. It advocates equal pay for equal work for women, but is silent on other aspects of women's oppression.

None of these criticisms provide a fundamental objection to the Charter. They point to the vagueness of the Charter in that, in the words of one critic, Duncan Innes, it 'does not specify precisely what political-economic system should be established in South Africa'. The exclusion of issues like workers' control, the right to strike, democratic accountability and the right to political organisation means that 'it falls short of goals which are fundamental to the workers' movement'. For a liberation movement which formally asserts the leading role of the working class, these ambiguities and absences must surely appear as a problem in need of resolving.

To do so, either the Charter needs to be revised or it needs to be supplemented or it needs to be scrapped in favour of a more adequate programme. The advocacy of a Workers' Charter by some intellec-

tuals and trade unionists has represented one attempt to deal with this problem, whether it is conceived as a substitute or a supplement — along the lines of the Women's Charter — to the Freedom Charter.

It would appear that the advantages to be gained in terms of winning and mobilising working class support from introducing such clarity would, as Innes has argued, 'far outweigh the disadvantages which the loss of a few opportunists involves'.

So why not embark on programmatic reform within the liberation movement to make it clear that the struggle is not simply to replace white bosses and policemen with blacks, but to transform the social and economic conditions of life of black people, including its vast majority, the working class? The CP is totally opposed to any tinkering with the Charter and one contributor to African Communist under the name of 'Observer' does his best to justify the Party's position. He is to be congratulated for taking the critics seriously and not falling into the use of vitriol which has characterised the manner in which the CP has handled most people with whom it disagreed in the past. Unfortunately 'Observer's' best is pathetically weak. There may be good reasons for the CP's resistance to the development of a more clearly socialist programme for South Africa, but whatever they are 'Observer' does not seem to know them. Let us consider just one of his arguments.

He says that 'sadly, most of the academic (sic) debate on the Freedom Charter has taken place in a kind of historical vacuum with the history of the liberation movement largely ignored'. But his own 'history' consists of a scattering of unsubstantiated assertions, among which is the old orthodoxy that 'the Charter was adopted at the most democratic gathering in the history of South Africa' and that this gives it a special legitimacy. Was it? Where's the evidence? Let us explore this throw-away line.

The organisation of the Freedom Charter campaign in 1955 was under the control of a National Action Council consisting of representatives of four 'nationally' defined groups: Africans, Asians, Coloureds and Whites. The idea was to recruit 'freedom volunteers' to publicise the Congress of the People and collect demands for the Charter. These demands were to be composed into a Charter by a sub-committee of the NAC and the finished product was then to be put for approval to elected representatives of the people at the Congress. The purpose, as Walter Sisulu put it, was to 'get the people themselves to say how they should be governed in the new democratic South Africa'. It was a good idea in terms of involving people in political discussion, but its idealisation both at the time and particularly now, thirty years later, as the 'most representative gathering there has ever been in South Africa' (Suttner and

Cronin), is historically untenable and politically dangerous.

In its own terms, the campaign was fraught with problems. New Age, the CP newspaper of the time, conceded that 'it would be foolish to deny that the plans for the Congress of the People had not suffered as a result of the government's attacks. They have'. Lutuli, the President-General of the ANC, complained that preparations for the Charter were made 'at a very late hour — too late in fact for the statements to be properly boiled down into one comprehensive statement. It was not even possible for the NAC to circulate the draft Charter fully'. Neither Lutuli nor ZK Matthews saw the Charter before the Congress. A directive issued by the NAC in May 1955 complained that 'not enough demands are flowing in' and

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later the NAC offered a thoroughly self-critical report on the Congress:

"We failed to set up an effective organisational machinery to make proper use of the Volunteers...After the initial period, there was a lapse of time during which very little work was done...The core of the leadership of the campaign was immobilised as a result of government bans...Your NAC and the four sponsoring bodies at no stage managed successfully to link COP with the day-to-day struggles of the people...Only a negligible number of local committees was set up. Our failure to do so resulted in the Congress of the People not being as representative as it might otherwise have been...-The overwhelming majority of the delegates came from the main urban centres...where the Congress branch had been operating for many years...It was a concern that the movement had not taken strong enough roots in the smaller towns and the vast and thickly populated countryside...Only a minute proportion came from the factories and the mines. This fact illustrates the low level of trade union organisation amongst the workers."

A tiny drafting committee eventually produced the Charter, which was presented to seven members of the ANC's National Executive but excluded Lutuli and Matthews. Little is known about the drafting committee, though Jo Slovo has claimed to be one of the people responsible for drafting the Charter. At the Congress itself, which was a compelling occasion, 2844 delegates attended. The various clauses of the Charter were introduced, there was an opportunity for impromptu speeches from various delegates, and then the clauses were acclaimed by a show of hands. There were no rival resolutions in spite of passionate opposition to aspects of the Charter from Africanists, Liberals, some members of the women's movement and some socialists.

ZK Matthews' original proposal was that a common voters' roll of everyone over 21 be prepared and that a general election for representatives to the Congress then be held. The scheme was dropped due to the impracticalities of organising such a venture and the danger that the state would read this as an attempt to establish an alternative organ of government. In its place a loose form of representation was introduced, allowing any group of any size to send one or more delegates. The result was something more like a rally than a delegates' conference.

Various Liberals protested that the Congress was a 'classical Communist frame-up' in which their role was 'merely to endorse pre-arranged decisions'. Africanists protested that the very organisation of the Congress was undemocratic in that in the NAC 'each (national) congress, irrespective of its membership, is represented by an equal number of delegates...An aggressive invasion of majority rule'.

These critics had their own axes to grind and their evidence should be treated with caution. But even Lutuli found problems. In discussions of the Freedom Charter after the Congress, the Natal Provincial Congress of the ANC, under Lutuli's influence, criticised the section on equal rights for all 'national groups' (i.e. races) for tending to over-emphasise racial distinctions and suggested instead a focus on building of one united nation. Like the Africanists, though for different reasons, Lutuli and the Natal branch wanted revision and full discussion of the Charter prior to its acceptance by the ANC. Concern was expressed about safeguarding the autonomy of the ANC against attempts to bulldoze the Charter and the multi-racial Alliance structure through, particularly as an abortive campaign to collect a million signatures for the Charter was initiated in advance of the ANC's endorsement. In the face of continuing divisions, no decision was made at the December 1955 national conference of the ANC; it was finally accepted at a special conference designed to discuss a quite different matter: the tactics of the women's anti-pass campaign.

Africanists charged that the meeting

had been packed with non-delegates to allow the Charter to be railroaded through. It is clear that there was no adequate discussion of the amendments put by Natal, let alone the criticisms of the Africanist minority, but, as Lutuli put it, 'ranks were closed against what was regarded as the obstructionism of the Leballo group. If there were misgivings about the Charter, most ANC members were reluctant to associate themselves with the Africanists' advocacy of African exclusivism. The principle of 'multi-racialism' enshrined in the Congress — based on separate representation of Africans, Asians, Coloureds and Whites — reproduced the racial categories of the state in the liberation movement, but it was preferable to the open racism of the 'extreme' Africanists.

Enough of this history. There is much more to be said, but enough has been said, not to discredit the Charter or the Congress themselves, but yes to repudiate those like 'Observer' who seek to idealise the origins of the Charter and thus reify it as the unchanging expression of the will of the people. Witness this recent assessment by the General Secretary of the United Democratic Front:

"The Freedom Charter is a unique document, it was created by the people. It is not the vision of any one individual or group of individuals, or any one organisation or group of organisations. It emerged from the dreams and ideas of ordinary people. The Charter is authoritative because of its birth."

This view is politically dangerous, because it not only mystifies the product of a particular political grouping as the general will of the people as a whole, but presents opposition to the Charter as opposition to the people. To oppose the Charter, so it would seem, was to be an enemy of the people. Immanent within this approach was a highly undemocratic practice within the liberation movement itself, which denied its diversity and the legitimacy of critical debate.

So what is the lesson from the history and the myth of the history? Surely it cannot be that of the inviolability of the Charter thirty years on. I am reminded of Marx's comment in his critique of Hegel's constitutionalism: 'a constitution produced by past consciousness can become an oppressive shackle for a consciousness which has progressed.'

The deeper problem with 'Observer' is not just that he does not appear to know the history of his own movement, but that he has an unreconstructed vision of what a 'democratic gathering' is. The limitation of the Freedom Charter lay not just in its content, but in its form. The Charter was in fact a programme of a particular party. But it is not presented as such. 'Observer' repeats the myth:

"The ANC is a national liberation movement which strives — on the basis of the Freedom Charter — to incorporate as many South Africans as possible...It is not a political party, so that to require of

it or the Charter a specific party programme is not only to misunderstand its role and nature but divisive."

In the 1950s, this argument was regularly used — particularly by Communists — to exclude socialist politics from the Congress Alliance. Socialism was 'divisive' because it alienated the middle class and it was 'partisan' because it represented only workers and not the 'nation' as a whole.

The possibility that Congress politics could be divisive because it alienates the working class and partisan because it represents only the middle class, is excluded by 'Observer'. He is in favour of democracy — just so long as the workers support 'the national democratic revolution', and not socialism, as 'an absolute prerequisite for the transformation of the Country'. He justifies the fact that the Charter is 'a deliberately open-ended document', so that no one knows precisely what it means. He denies the right of even the membership of the ANC to reformulate their own programme since 'for the most basic reasons of democracy and legitimacy, it is difficult to contradict the position of the ANC, which...has insisted that any attempt to alter the Charter can only take place at a reconvened Congress of the People'. Taking a leaf out of the Unity Movement's books, he translates the Charter as a set of 'minimum demands' without saying a word about what the maximum demands might be. Then he sinks into a mix of mysticism, abuse and projection: 'socialism is only meaningful when it is lived, when it is part of the very fabric of society, and this can only be achieved through struggle. This is the arena in which the Charter is being clarified, not in the sterile corridors of academia or committees'. A curious slur, as the impetus for a Workers' Charter has come from trade unionists!

The authoritarianism of this anti-party political culture was fostered in the 1950s by Communists in the Congress who kept their own party organisation secret, not just from the state but also from their allies in Congress. Moses Kotane, publicly a leading member of the ANC and privately a leading member of the CP, was to the fore in rejecting a party political perspective:

"Congresses are not and should not be homogeneous bodies of people who all belong to the same class and share the same outlook, but are essentially united fronts of all sections of an oppressed nationality who seek liberty and democracy."

If the Charter had been put forward as a particular party programme, determined by the party members according to the particular structures of decision-making of that party, capable of being revised or scrapped as the party develops, open to rational criticism by other parties with other programmes, then its mystique might have been less but its roots in a democratic political tradition much deeper. But this was not the way it was, nor is it the way it is.

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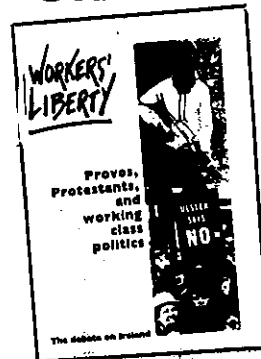
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