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The cover of the first issue of *The African Communist* in October, 1959



# African Communist

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50 YEARS OF AC

## A half-century of mobilisation, communist analysis and propaganda

**Blade Nzimande**, the SACP General Secretary, reviews AC's '50 writing years' and salutes all those who have contributed to its success

**A** browse through the very first edition of *The African Communist* not only gives an insight into the time and context during which it was launched, but also the courageous and defiant character of those who breathed life into our historic journal.

“This magazine, *the African Communist*, has been started by a group of Marxist-Leninists in Africa, to defend and spread the inspiring and liberating ideas of Communism in our great Continent, and to apply the brilliant scientific method of Marxism to the solution of its problems.

“It is being produced in conditions of great difficulty and danger. Nevertheless we mean to go on publishing it, because we know that Africa needs Communist thought, as dry and thirsty soil needs rain.”

These conditions of “great difficulty and danger” developed as a result of the banning of the Communist Party of South Africa in 1950 and its underground reconstitution as the South African Communist Party in 1953.

### **The political origins of the AC**

Veteran comrades tell of the fierce behind-the-scenes debate at the time about

whether the reconstitution of the Party should have been publicly announced. Those who argued against the public declaration worried that it would jeopardise and raise suspicions about the motives of known communists in the trade union movement, in the ANC and the Congress Alliance. It is ironic that even now, 50 years later, the tendency to ring alarm bells about the motives of communists has not dissipated; albeit now this view is reinforced by a creeping and dangerous intersection between holding of public office and business interests. All this proves is that our Alliance has stood the test of time.

Those who wanted the reconstituted Party to be publicly announced argued that this would be a necessary act of defiance and would give confidence to existing communists that they still had a political home. It would also allow for ease in the recruitment of new members into the underground. True to the robust character of the Party, the debate raged for many years until in 1959 the publication of *The African Communist* symbolised a compromise. It was decided that a journal would be published as a forum for Marxist-Leninist thought in Africa, but not as an official

publication of the now reconstituted SACP, as it indeed was.

Although it was launched in trying conditions and faced severe restrictions, the AC, which was produced in London, was from the outset bold and forthright. Under the heading “Why they hate communism”, an editorial in that historic first issue in part read: “It is no accident that the first thing the Nationalist Government did, when it took power in 1948, was to outlaw Communism. They banned the Communist Party, which for 30 years had led the people in struggles for freedom and equality. Hundreds of Communists have been banned and banished, driven out of their jobs, forbidden on pain of jail to go to meetings or take any part in political and trade union movements.

“Yet, belief in Communism lives on in South Africa. It is spreading throughout the Continent, although every day it is denounced and attacked by agents of United States, British, French, Portuguese, and Belgian imperialism.

“They hate Communism because they know that the Communists are the bravest, most clear-headed and incorruptible leaders in the people’s struggle against imperialism, for freedom and equality. They know that once the African workers and peasants have mastered the great ideas of Communism, nothing will stop them in their onward march to freedom, independence and socialism.”

#### **The African revolution and not 'renaissance'**

That first edition of the AC pioneered the idea of an African revolution saying the peoples of the continent needed the “liberating spirit of Communism” to be free of the forces of imperialism. It is a point worth noting that the founders spoke of an African “revolution” not an

African “Renaissance”. They wanted an uprising which was rooted in African realities not a conversion which copied the European Renaissance.

The heroic contribution of SACP freedom fighters to the liberation struggle will perhaps never be completely documented and understood, particularly by future generations. One of their greatest achievements was to enrich political discourse through published material and to lead and develop public debate in the movement. While the struggle against racial discrimination defined the liberation struggle, a succession of SACP leaders promoted an understanding of the class struggle, and the intersection between racial and class divides and struggles in South African society. The AC was one of the mediums which reflected and supported years of fearless political activism and thinking through examining topical issues of the time from a communist perspective.

#### **The pioneering role of communists in progressive media**

The SACP is proud of its role in promoting and cultivating progressive media in South Africa. *Umsebenzi* (The Worker) played a pioneering role in the late 20s and early 30s as a platform for internal and external communication for the working class.

The apartheid machinery did its damndest to restrict, ban or close publications, and in so doing constrain the flow of information and political knowledge in South Africa. Lobbies for censorship can be traced back to at least 1898 in the Cape, but the rise to power of the Nationalist Party government in 1948 ushered in unprecedented degrees of censorship. Over the next 37 years, more than 100 laws restricting the flow of information wiped away all semblance of press freedom.

But an array of brave and heroic journal-

ists kept the spirit alive through publications such as *New Nation*, *Weekly Mail*, *Vrye Weekblad*, *South*, *New African*, *Injula* and *Speak*. Despite having limited resources and in the face of constant harassment by the apartheid regime, they displayed tenacity, courage and resourcefulness. These publications played an invaluable role in exposing the horrors of the regime and telling “the other side of the story”. It is one of the tragedies of our past that not one of these publications still exists to tell the story of this phase of our history. In their place are, at best, poor cousins of those valiant publications, pandering to special, narrow and commercial interests.

During the liberation struggle, there was recognition within the movement that an integral part of defiance and mobilisation against apartheid was through the promotion and sustenance of media publications. *Work in Progress*, for instance, was a progressive publication, produced from 1977 to 1994 and founded by University of Witwatersrand postgraduate students. Under trying conditions, the AC was also kept alive as an internal theoretical journal of the SACP and in 1990, moved to South Africa where it took on a new role during the transition phase and democratic era.

It is also important that at this stage we must note the fact that for the entire existence of both the ANC and the SACP, (the White-owned) colonial and bourgeois media, which has been the mainstream media for over a century, has always been against the national liberation movement. Prior to 1994, it acted as the mouthpiece of the white bourgeoisie and the apartheid state, and since 1994 has generally acted as part of the array of forces in opposition to the national liberation movement.

In the course of its vehement opposition to the national liberation movement, the colonial and bourgeois mainstream media

has consistently supported and praised all the factions that have sought to undermine the national liberation movement and its alliance components and formations. For example, when the PAC broke away from the ANC in 1958, it was praised by the media as the more genuine representative of the oppressed majority, in the same way as the Group of 8, the UDM and now Cope have been championed as better organisations than the ANC and the Alliance. Similarly, the enthusiastic manner in which a publication like the *Mail and Guardian* has highlighted sinister and opportunistic attacks on the SACP and Cosatu by what are essentially elements of the emerging black sections of the bourgeoisie and other compradorial elements on 9 October 2009, are nothing but a reflection of this continuous assault of the bourgeois media on the progressive policies of our movement.

As has always been the case, the colonial and bourgeois media have always found useful idiots to advance their agenda, even within the ranks of our own movement. It was also these tendencies that the very first edition of the AC referred to; highlighting the fact that imperialism often succeeds under conditions where it also fosters its own local compradorial elites, by also projecting them favourably in their own media. It is precisely for these reasons that publications like the AC are important in exposing this agenda while simultaneously being a platform for deepening a working class led national democratic revolution.

#### **A platform for debates on the NDR and the struggle for socialism**

Since its launch, the AC has been a leading platform for debate on current and controversial issues. The July/August edition of 1962 talks of its reception around the

world and how the first special edition in French made a favourable impression in French-speaking parts of Africa. An editorial on the success of the AC read as follows: "Since its first publication, at the end of 1959, *The African Communist* has met with, and continues to find, a warm, indeed a glowing reception, not only in all parts of Africa, but in many other parts of the world. Articles from our magazine have been reprinted in British, Canadian and United States publications, they have been translated and published in Arabic, Russian, Chinese and other languages. The British monthly, *Marxism Today*, in its issue of April, 1962, says, 'We would like warmly to greet and pay tribute to our colleague *The African Communist*,' and proceeds to give its readers a detailed survey of the contents of our issue No. 8. In the same month, the French journal *Démocratie Nouvelle*, reprinting the article on South African racialism by Toussaint from our French language special edition, lists the contents of this edition and offers to make copies available to its readers on request.

"For this continuing success we who, under severe difficulties, produce this journal owe most of all to you, our readers, who continue to write in from every part of Africa and many other parts of the world, encouraging and inspiring us in our work.

"The recognition of our journal in the communist world as a formidable medium for Marxist-Leninist thought and debate was also illustrated through the extension of an invitation by the editor of the distinguished Soviet publication, *Pravda*, for a representative of the AC to attend its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations."

All this coincided with the programme of the SACP in 1962, *The Road to South African Freedom* which first introduced the concept of "Colonialism of a Special Type"

as the most appropriate characterisation of South Africa, a colony where both the coloniser and colonised shared the same territory.

The 1962 programme will perhaps go down in history as one of the SACP's most significant programmes in shaping and defining both the character and tasks of the South African revolution. This programme firmly emphasised the need to unite all the oppressed whilst simultaneously defining the leading role of the working class in the national liberation struggle.

The imprisonment of many of our freedom fighters in the 60s including Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Govan Mbeki, Raymond Mhlaba, Bram Fischer, Ahmed Kathrada, Elias Motsoaledi and many others, and the harassment of those who operated in the underground, led to a challenging and dark period in the struggle for liberation with a visible stagnation in the revolution. In 1970, an Augmented CC of the SACP issued a call to the South African people that reignited the spirit of defiance and mass struggle. *Freedom Can Be Won* was circulated illegally inside the country and reproduced in the AC. The call to action then included the following: "Today at this critical time, the Communist Party calls on you. It calls on all South Africans who love their country and who love freedom. We call upon the workers and the people in the countryside. We call upon the African people, the Coloured people, the Indians and the democratic elements among the whites.

"Let us build up our people's organisations, in town and country, in factories, mines and villages.

"Let us unite for the fight to end the shame and suffering of white minority rule: headed by the Nazi Nationalist Party.

"Let us resolve that the beginning of the seventies will put an end to white South

Africa and mark the beginning of People's South Africa advancing towards socialism.

"The armed groups of Umkhonto we Sizwe are ready to enter the fight. But they cannot fight alone.

"The people must act!

"They must build and support their illegal organisations. the ANC: the trade unions and the Communist Party.

"They must act militantly for higher wages, land and freedom.

"They must arouse the spirit of resistance and defiance.

"They must arm themselves.

"The war of national liberation is on and we must fight it to the finish.

"Victory or death!"

The people of South Africa responded and with the working class in the lead, three years later South Africa was rocked by the 1973 Durban strikes that laid the foundation for the internal rebuilding of a progressive trade union movement. Six years later, the Soweto students' uprisings, spreading into many parts of our country, indeed, changed the course of history. The AC was able to analyse the uprising and provide an understanding of the mood and circumstances of the time.

The AC was also central in debates around the formation of Cosatu, particularly the two strands of thinking at the time about its nature and character. It was able to examine the thinking within Fosatu, which was at its formation dominated by a workerist tendency, as well as the push for a revolutionary trade union movement aligned to the Congress movement. In this way, the AC guided debates and analysis as Cosatu took shape and deepened working class struggles in the workplace.

Over the years, the AC became the only published platform of major Alliance discussions, among the most notable was the

debate on the "sunset clauses" during the transition period in the early 1990s.

Post 1994, it remained a major carrier of Central Committee discussion documents and political reports of the SACP. It led the debates and analyses on amongst other things, the dangers associated with access to state power without a mobilised working class, undertook the most thorough critiques of the ill-advised Gear policy and attempts on wholesale privatisation of state-owned enterprises, and properly grasped the weakness and what is to be done on what we now refer to as the "1996 class project".

In the 10 years following the adoption of Gear, our Alliance relations turned for the worse – perhaps the worst in its entire existence. But what our detractors, both inside and outside our movement, do not fully appreciate has been the role of our publications, especially *Umsebenzi* and the AC, in keeping us focused, deepening the SACP's and broader working class movement's ideological coherence, and clearly defining the revolutionary line of march for our country. Due to resource and other constraints, we did not publish all editions in each year as planned, but the AC continues to be an important weapon in the struggle to deepen, advance and consolidate the national democratic revolution.

Then, in November 2007, *the African Communist* published an open letter from the SACP to the ANC membership titled: "We can't go on like this...together, let's make sure things change".

The concluding paragraph read: "The SACP calls on fellow ANC members – together, let us rise to the challenge of the ANC 52nd National Conference. Together, let us re-build an ANC and an alliance of which cdes Albert Luthuli, Moses Kotane, OR Tambo, Walter Sisulu, Chris Hani could be truly proud. That historic respon-

sibility is now in our collective hands.”

As with the call to action in 1970, the spirit of this letter resonated, and we are pleased that the ANC delegates to the Polokwane conference grasped the moment and reclaimed the ANC, and indeed our Alliance, and took back control of their organisation from the clutches of the 1996 Class Project. We will forever be proud of the contribution of the SACP, together with others, in effecting this turnaround. True to our historic role, we will continue to stand as the vanguard of the working class and not be cowed by attacks by those who seek to reinvent the Class Project in our ranks, mainly guided by narrow class interests. The AC will continue to re-affirm the truism that there is no contradiction between the multi-class character of our movement and the working class bias of the ANC.

One of the greatest achievements of our 50-year-old journal, *the African Communist*, was that it developed and encouraged writing and analytical talent over the decades of its existence. In so doing, it has become a major resource for analysis of the challenges we have overcome and continue to face. In keeping the AC alive, we need to promote writing particularly among young communist cadres and provide a platform for new ideas and debates.

As we celebrate this remarkable milestone of our journal, we need to ensure the

sustenance and development of publications which counter the proliferation and influence of the bourgeois media. South Africa has been ideologically suffocated by a mainstream media which remains out of touch with the masses of our people.

Therefore publications such as the AC, *Umsebenzi*, *Umrabulo*, *The Shopsteward* and others remain important platforms to provide information, knowledge and timely analysis of political developments and working class struggles in our country and in the world.

In advancing some of our recent perspectives and analyses, and enriching Marxism-Leninism in Africa, especially when we talk about the ‘1996 class project’, a ‘compradorial BEE’, etc, some of our detractors claim that the AC, if not the SACP, has substituted labels for analysis. Nothing can be further from the truth, as such concepts are not labels but actually capture the evolving class struggles and tendencies in South African society.

We owe it to generations of communists, and indeed revolutionaries and combatants in our broader liberation movement, to continue to publish the AC and other progressive journals.

We also need to take this opportunity to salute the founders of the AC, and the thousands of leaders and cadres who participated in its production and debates over the last 50 years. ★

**50 YEARS OF AC**

# The new Africa – capitalist or socialist?

**A**FRICA IS IN REVOLT. From East to West, from North to South, the peoples of this great Continent are arising to claim their birthright that has been stolen. The imperialist Powers and the White minorities are being forced to give up the land and the natural resources. Africans are uniting in powerful national liberation movements and trade unions. The imperialists are trying to prolong their rule. They send soldiers to shoot down the people. They try to bribe the people's leaders. When that does not work they arrest and deport them on framed-up charges. They invent faked 'treason' charges and 'massacre' plots. They promise half independence, or self-government on the instalment plan.

These methods cannot succeed. Africa is on the march for freedom, her people are awake, and nothing can stop them from reaching their goal: government of Africa

by Africans for Africans. The imperialist powers must quit Africa. The White minorities must accept the condition of equality and give up their ill-gotten privileges.



These are the first words published as 'Editorial Notes' in the historic first edition of AC in October 1959

What shape will the new Africa take? Will it be capitalist, like Western Europe and America? Or socialist, like Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union and China? That is something the peoples of this Continent will have to answer for themselves. It is a big question. The future happiness and well-being of our people and our children depend upon it. It is important that we should choose wisely.

Let us look at the two systems.

**Two systems**

We know capitalism in Africa. We have seen it and suffered under it.

Under capitalism, the land, the natural resources and the industries, built up by the hands of the workers, belong to private

owners or companies. Each owner is producing not for the public good but for his private profit. He pays as little wages as he can and wants to take as much as possible for himself.

Take a capitalist who is making shoes in a factory. He is not worried about the people who are barefoot. He wants to make a lot of money and get rich. All the profit he makes comes out of the exploitation of the workers, for all value comes from labour. Capitalism means the exploitation of man by man.

Socialism is different. All the means of production—the land, the mines, factories and so on—belong to the people as a whole. Production is planned. The aim is to see that everyone gets good food to eat, clothes to wear, houses to live in. The aim of production and of society, is to see that people are happy and comfortable, that they are highly educated and cultured. The worker knows that no capitalist profits from his labour. The country goes ahead quickly because development is properly planned. Socialism means the abolition of exploitation.

#### **Overcoming backwardness**

Centuries of imperialist domination and robbery have left Africa backward and undeveloped. The European powers, Britain, France, Portugal, Belgium, have only been interested in taking as much wealth out of the country as quickly as possible. At one time they captured millions of our people, and deported them to Europe and America as slaves. Afterwards they enslaved Africans in their own continent, through forced labour on European-owned plantations, farms and mines, at starvation wages.

As a result of alien oppression and exploitation, Africa is the most backward part of the world. The great masses of her

people live in terrible poverty, ignorance and disease. The first task of every African patriot is to liberate our Continent from alien domination, for without this there can be no progress. But to win and to keep true freedom we must also free Africa from backwardness. Her countries must be able to stand on their own feet economically, her people's living, health and cultural standards must be rapidly advanced.

Experience has proved that socialism is the most suitable method of quickly developing countries which are economically backward. Russia was formerly the most backward of the big European countries. Under socialism she has shot forward in forty years to become the most advanced, although many of those years were taken up in wars against imperialist intervention. In the last war, the Soviet Union was the only country on the mainland of Europe which successfully withstood Hitler's brutal armies and thus saved the world from Nazi domination.

It was socialism which gave Soviet industry the strength and her people the fighting spirit to resist and conquer. The Sputniks and the man-made planet prove that Soviet science and industry today are second to none.

In ten short years, socialism and Communist leadership have transformed China from a land of terrible backwardness, illiteracy and poverty, to a land of flourishing industry and agriculture, of advanced education and progress. India and China won freedom from imperialist rule at about the same time. But India chose the capitalist road; China the socialist road. Today China has far outstripped India in economic progress.

#### **Different kinds of socialism**

Some people try to tell you there are different kinds of socialism. They like

socialism, they say, but not the kind they have in the Soviet Union and China. The British Labour Party says it is in favour of socialism. So does the French Socialist Party. But if one studies these parties one will find that their socialism is only in words, not in deeds. Though the Labour Party was once in the government in England, the real power was still held by the big capitalists and imperialists. Private companies still own the big banks, industries and so on. The Labour Government continued to oppress the colonial people in the British Empire in the interests of big business. The French so-called 'Socialist' Party did the same. They support the French Government on the 'dirty war' against the people of Algeria.

Others talk of a special sort of 'African' socialism. Some African leaders of independent countries also claim to be socialists, although they do not practise socialism and even suppress socialist and Communist literature and leaders.

There is only one kind of genuine Socialism in the world. That is revolutionary Marxism, Communism. The so-called 'different kinds' of socialism have been proved not to be socialism at all, but just different kinds of capitalism, wearing a socialist mask to try to bluff the workers.

#### **Why they hate communism**

Nothing is so much hated and feared by the imperialists and their agents as Communism and the Communists. American officials are running all over the Continent of Africa offering dollars—if only people will help them against Communism. But we notice that the people who shout so loudly against Communism are often the people who are most bitterly opposed to African freedom.

Look at the Union of South Africa. Everybody knows that the Nationalist Government of that country, with its pol-

icy of apartheid, is a savage and ruthless enemy of African progress. That is where Africans are hunted for passes, flogged and murdered, sent to forced labour on farms and mines, insulted and persecuted, simply because they are dark-skinned.

It is no accident that the first thing the Nationalist Government did, when it took power in 1948, was to outlaw Communism. They banned the Communist Party, which for thirty years had led the people in struggles for freedom and equality. Hundreds of Communists have been banned and banished, driven out of their jobs, forbidden on pain of jail to go to meetings or take any part in political and trade union movements.

Yet, belief in Communism lives on in South Africa. It is spreading throughout the Continent, although every day it is denounced and attacked by agents of United States, British, French, Portuguese, and Belgian imperialism.

They hate Communism because they know that the Communists are the bravest, most clear-headed and incorruptible leaders in the people's struggle against imperialism, for freedom and equality. They know that once the African workers and peasants have mastered the great ideas of Communism, nothing will stop them in their onward march to freedom, independence and socialism.

#### **They tell lies**

The imperialists and White supremacists pass laws to make it illegal to defend Communism. They try to shut the mouths of the Communists. They tell lies about Communism to deceive the people. They hope that, as they have silenced the Communists, there will be no one to answer their lies. But the truth is stronger than lies. Communism is today a great and victorious world-movement, embracing more

than a third of the human race. You cannot shut Africans out from the outside world or prevent their learning what is going on elsewhere. Nor can you succeed in silencing the voice of Communism in Africa for the Communists are part and parcel of the people of Africa. The African Communists will answer the lies of the imperialists.

Here are some of the lies:

(1) *'That capitalism is democratic, and Communism means dictatorship.'*

Africans are not likely to be bluffed by this lie. They have seen 'Western democracy' in action for too long. They have seen it answer the demands of the Africans for real democracy and self-government with bullets, terror and mass arrests. Certainly Communism means to suppress the imperialist agents, and the institutions of backwardness and slavery which they have encouraged and tolerated. Call that dictatorship if you like. But it is a people's dictatorship, used by the workers and peasants against their enemies. For the masses it means much greater freedom and democracy than is possible in any other form of society. It means people's control of the wealth and resources of their own country. Under capitalism, even where people have the vote, the rich are always the real rulers. Those who control the wealth are the real controllers of the State.

(2) *'That Communism is out to suppress religion.'*

That is not true, either. Marxism is not a religious philosophy. It believes that everything can be explained rationally, and that all religions are forms of superstition. At the same time, Communists respect people's religious beliefs and the rights of all to propagate all religious, or anti-religious, views. Certainly, if the imperialists use

religion as a cloak for oppression and the master-race cult, they must be vigorously opposed. But no genuine church or religious group has any need to fear a Communist or socialist society.

(3) *'That Communists are out to replace Western imperialism with "Soviet imperialism".'*

Another straight lie. There is no such thing as 'Soviet imperialism'. There is no capitalist class in the Soviet Union to profit by exploiting colonies. Communists believe in self-determination: that all people have the right to govern themselves, in the interests of their own people. They reject all theories of 'master races' and 'inferior races' and fight to end race discrimination. The Soviet Union is giving generous aid in the development of African countries, to establish their national independence on a sound basis. Even where these countries are led by anti-Communists, like Nasser and the Emperor of Abyssinia, the Soviet Union is helping them as much as possible, without any strings or conditions. Those who talk nonsense about so-called 'Soviet imperialism' should remember that under Communist leadership and with Soviet assistance, China's 600 million people have achieved a greater measure of freedom, independence and unity than ever before in its long history.

Communists in Africa are out to win full freedom and independence for African countries.

#### **Is Africa 'different'?**

Some people say: 'Communism may be all very well in Europe, or Asia, but Africa is different. There are no classes or class struggle in this Continent; all Africans are the same; and they have only one task—to get rid of imperialism.'

Let us answer these points one by one.

First of all, Africa is only 'different' because, as a result of imperialism, it is economically backward. As soon as industries develop, and private property in land, the people will be divided more and more into capitalists, workers and peasants.

Already there are classes and class struggles. There are rich and poor. There are Africans who own property and exploit the labour of others; and there are Africans who have nothing to sell except their labour-power. There are the workers, the proletariat, as Marx called them: the landless and property less.

The proletariat is the most advanced class, the bravest and most clear-sighted fighters against imperialism. They have nothing to lose but their chains, and they will fight to the end against imperialism, even when the middle classes would like to compromise and accept minor concessions which will leave the masses little better off than before.

It is true that our first task in Africa is to get rid of imperialism. Communist ideas are weapons in this struggle. The policy of Communists in countries suffering from national oppression is to unite all classes in the common struggle for freedom. This struggle will be won quicker and more completely if it is led by the working class, guided by the scientific understanding of Marxism.

After imperialism has been defeated, the struggle will not be over. The countries of Africa will still be faced with the tasks of overcoming poverty, exploitation, disease and ignorance. These battles can only be won by marching towards a Communist Africa.

#### **Karl Marx and the science of socialism**

There were Socialists in the world before the time of the great German revolutionary, Karl Marx, who died in 1883, but these

pioneers had merely seen that it would be more reasonable to organise production in a socialist way, rather than a capitalist one. To them, socialism was a beautiful dream of what the world could be like. Marx changed socialism from a dream into a science. He discovered the laws which determine change in human society.

Marx showed how society develops from lower to higher forms – tribalism, slavery, feudalism, capitalism, socialism – according to the development of the productive forces at each stage.

The Marxist philosophy, dialectical materialism, enables us to understand these laws. It gives us the key to understanding the world as it really is – and how to change it.

All progress comes through conflicts and contradictions. There is a conflict between what is new and struggling to be born, and what is old and dying.

Great leaders like Lenin and Mao Tse-tung have shown how these laws can be used to transform society. They saw that the main force in modern society which is struggling for a better life is the working class. Under the banner of Marxism the working class in one country after another is triumphing over capitalism.

#### **The duties of an African Communist**

The imperialists are trying to keep the knowledge of Communism from the African people. But they cannot succeed. More and more working people in the Continent are striving to learn more about Marxism.

The duty of a Communist is to study Marxism and the conditions in his own country, wherever he may be, and to teach others.

In Africa Communists have also other duties, if they are not merely parlour-socialists. They have to take an active part in the struggles of their people, as oppressed

people, for national liberation.

National liberation is a task for the whole nation, not just for the working class. Therefore the Communists, everywhere in our Continent, will work to build a United Front of National Liberation, of all classes, workers, peasants, intellectuals and businessmen.

Within this United Front they will also work to see that the working class plays an independent and leading part. The workers should be organised, economically and politically. They should be organised in trade unions to get better wages and conditions. The workers also need their own political party. Starting with Marxist study classes, they should aim at building a powerful Communist Party in each region of

Africa, a Party that will be an essential and vital partner in the United Front, the pride of the workers and oppressed people.

Only by building a true Communist Party will the workers of Africa be able to play their leading part in the emancipation of their great continent. A Party which is a true leading section of the proletariat and the people as a whole, which fights in the front line of every people's struggle for freedom, big and small; a Party which earns its right to leadership, not by engaging in petty quarrels for positions, but by playing a brave and worthy role in the fight for bread, land and freedom; for the overthrow of imperialism and White domination, for the advance of Africa to a glorious socialist future. ★

## 50 YEARS OF AC

## Launching *The African Communist*

**Joe Matthews** was present to experience the dangerous and difficult conditions under which AC was launched

The most significant revolutions of the Twentieth Century are those in which Marxist theory was combined with practice to produce profound economic and social results. Marxism is not a dogma. It is a scientifically based tool of analysis from which a clear strategy and tactics emerge. Marxist theory is not based on abstract or speculative thought. It is a generalisation of historical experience grounded in human interaction with nature in the process of social and economic development. In other words Marxist theory is historical materialism which in turn reflects the philosophical outlook of dialectical materialism.

From a Marxist point of view, two trends have dominated our epoch: The one is the struggle of the urban and rural poor for emancipation from exploitation. The other trend is the struggle of oppressed peoples against imperialism and colonialism. It was Vladimir Lenin who proposed at the first Congress of the Third International that the famous slogan of the workers should be amended so that it read "Workers and oppressed peoples of the world unite". This would better express the symbiotic link between the workers emancipation and the freedom of oppressed peoples.

The Communist Party of South Africa was founded in 1921 almost simultaneously with the Communist Party of China, which met for the first time in Shanghai in the same month as the CPSA. This happy coincidence may turn out to be of great significance in the destiny of both parties in the contemporary world. The CPSA was like all other Communist Parties a section of the Third Communist International. As a digression, it should be noted that the International Socialist League in South Africa was one of the parties that parted with the Second International when the latter betrayed the workers' cause by supporting the imperialist World War I. The ISL was later to become the leading component of the founding Conference of the CPSA.

What was the situation in terms of political education in the Party between the years 1921 to 1943 when the Comintern concluded that it had successfully carried out its historic mission as an organising centre of the International Communist Movement?

Throughout this period, the CPSA operated as a legal organisation despite local restrictions of various kinds. The Party mobilised the masses; built trade unions; ran schools which not only taught the three Rs but more importantly philosophy, political

economy, and history of the world from a proletarian point of view. The Party had newspapers, journals and bookshops which constituted an extensive independent media that carried the genuine and unadulterated message of the Party.

Of crucial importance, the Party sent members to the Comintern Lenin Academy for thorough training. The contribution of the Comintern trained cadres cannot be overestimated. We must pay due tribute to Albert Nzula, Moses Kotane, J B Marks, Edwin Mofutsanyane and others who were products of the Comintern School.

Tribute must also be paid to white radicals from Britain, Russia and elsewhere who made an invaluable contribution through their work in the trade union movement and, most relevant to this seminar, encouraged all to study, study, study. The dedication to well-grounded intellectual development, which they deeply embedded in the culture of the Party, was to pay rich dividends for the future of the proletarian and liberation movement. In addition, the entire treasure house of literature by numerous fraternal parties was easily available and circulated widely not only among Party members but among the general public.

Contrary to the statutes and programme of the Comintern, the party did not prepare for the possibility of illegality in the conditions of repression, and failed to create an illegal apparatus.

The Party did however work tirelessly to implement the terms of the 1928 Theses on South Africa which enjoined the Party to work for the freedom and liberation of primarily the African and other oppressed people in South Africa. The theses specifically mentioned the importance of working in the African National Congress. The problems we are currently experiencing in

the Alliance as components of a democratic government are nothing compared to those contradictions in the period of struggle. Today what we are faced with is the need for the correct handling of contradictions among the people. That is an infinitely less complex than the contradictions of society. We must stop getting uptight about so-called differences among ourselves which we wrongly elevate to the status of major antagonistic contradictions. Our forbears overcame much greater problems.

Then in 1950 the Suppression of Communism Act 44 of 1950 came into effect and the Party was banned. The assets of the Party were seized. The entire edifice built over many years suddenly ceased. Thereafter what had been taken for granted became a risky and difficult task. Many of the leading cadres of the Party even doubted if it was possible to survive under the unfamiliar conditions of illegality. Slowly and painfully, step by step, the Party had to be rebuilt beginning from 1953. The background of legalism was still to be seen in the decision to rename the Party as the South African Communist Party to distinguish it from the banned Communist Party of South Africa.

The launch of a theoretical journal of the working class is not a business decision. It is a decision based on the recognition of a need dictated by political factors. What were the factors that created the necessity for a theoretical journal in South Africa and Africa in 1959? The leadership of the SACP assessed the correlation of forces internationally, continentally and nationally since 1956. On 1 January 1956 the British flag was lowered to signal the departure of British troops from the Nile Valley. Sudan gained its independence. In February 1956 the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU met and ushered in changes of international

significance. In March 1956 Morocco and Tunisia gained independence from France. On 26 July 1956 Egypt, in a historic move, nationalised the Suez Canal. This led to the attack on Egypt by France, Britain and Israel in October 1956.

In October 1956 the 8<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Communist Party of China convened. On 5 December 1956 leaders of the Congress Movement in South Africa were arrested and charged with High Treason. The same trends of developing Socialism and the struggle against imperialism continued to manifest themselves in 1957. Ghana gained independence in March 1957. In November of that year the Anniversary of the Great October Socialist Revolution brought together Socialist countries, Communist parties and liberation movements which gathered in Moscow and adopted a Declaration with far-reaching consequences. 1958 saw the independence of Guinea Conakry to be followed in 1959 by Mali and Senegal. The All-African Peoples Conference in 1958 was the first Pan-African Conference held on African soil and united independent African states and Liberation Movements. The revolution in Cuba triumphed in 1959. In October 1959 the 10th anniversary of the Chinese Revolution that shook the world was commemorated. The Liberation Movement in South Africa had a fairly effective media. The weekly *New Age* served as a great organiser of the masses and their organisations. The journal *Fighting Talk* published monthly and edited by Ruth First was a powerful instrument. The quar-

terly *Liberation* provided a platform for the theoreticians. These were all legal journals, which for that reason were limited in scope and could not fulfil a complete role as theoretical leader of the working class and its ideology of Marxism-Leninism

The SACP was about to emerge and would require a clear voice. Furthermore events on the African continent cried out for serious scientific journals that would provide analysis and guidance for political cadres. But what would be its name? There followed an almost Talmudic argument about whether it should simply be called “Communist” or “African Communist”. Marxism is a universal science and some argued it would be compromised by a name that suggested limitation to a particular continent. Others felt that Africa was on the march to a new destiny and that the Communists must be part of that historic mission. In the end, the name “African Communist” was adopted. History has vindicated the choice.

The question that now arises as it did then: Is the media adequate for the tasks of the Party and the Liberation Movement? Is the progressive movement well served by the current situation? A contemporary analysis seems essential and urgent. ★

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## 50 YEARS OF AC

## *The African Communist's* clandestine years

These were the years in which AC grew from editions of 1 000 cyclostyled copies to distributing tens of thousands copies of each edition, writes **Ronnie Kasrils**

**T**he first issue of *the African Communist* in October, 1959, proclaimed: “Africa needs Communist thought, as dry and thirsty soil needs rain.”

For 30 years, working in dangerous and difficult conditions, the underground South African Communist Party (SACP) and its cadres outwitted the apartheid security forces to get the message to our embattled people.

There is a saying – “Don’t judge a book by its cover.” The first editions of the journal had plain black covers and later during the long period of exile from where the AC was published and printed, special pocket-sized editions with innocent looking covers on “Gardening”, “Cooking” or “Game Viewing” were smuggled home<sup>i</sup>. These would be photocopied and furtively passed from hand to hand. Any slip-up attracting the suspicion of the security police could mean instant arrest – and worse. Whether in the homes, factories and learning centres of South Africa; “safe houses” in the neighbouring states; guerrilla camps in Angola and elsewhere; exile communities around the world – every issue was looked forward to “as thirsty soil welcomes rain”. By

1977 the AC could report that “tens of thousands of copies” had circulated inside South Africa<sup>ii</sup>.

An AC article in 1977 entitled “The Underground Voice” commented that the qualitative value of revolutionary propaganda increased when truth was at a premium. “Important as propaganda activity is during ‘normal’ times, it takes on a higher, qualitative value during illegal times and especially during periods of intense struggle.<sup>iii</sup>” A Security Police “expert” on clandestine propaganda reported that the “SACP and ANC literally bombarded the country with pamphlets which were inflammatory and attempted to prepare people for an armed struggle to remove the government by force and to institute a new regime.<sup>iv</sup>”

In the 100<sup>th</sup> issue, SACP General Secretary Moses Mabhida stated: “In the forefront of [the] struggle is the battle of ideas. The literature we publish is an integral part of the common cause of the people’s struggle, a component of organised, planned and integrated work.<sup>v</sup>”

In this historic 50th anniversary year of the AC’s unbroken existence, it is fitting that we consider the 30 years of its clandestine period, and pay tribute to the

comrades – many hidden heroes and heroines behind the scenes – who toiled to produce and distribute it under hazardous conditions. Today’s journal rests on their legacy.

The first issue of the AC was produced at a dramatic time when apartheid and colonial racism ruled throughout the Southern African region; our continent was emerging from the shackles of colonial bondage; the socialist world appeared to be in the ascendancy over international capitalism. That inaugural 1959 edition<sup>vi</sup> reflected the extraordinary shifts in the world balance of power, and carried the rousing declaration:

“Communism has become the vital social and political belief of our times. Already one-third of mankind has chosen the road to socialism under the leading banners of the Marxist parties. Everywhere else, millions of men and women press forward to their own liberation, inspired by the parties of Communism.

“In this, as in so much else, Africa lags behind the world. The forces of imperialism, which have made Africa the ‘dark continent’, have also kept the people curtailed off from the liberating spirit of Communism.

“This magazine, the African Communist, has been started by a group of Marxist-Leninists in Africa, to defend and spread the inspiring and liberating ideas of Communism in our great Continent, and to apply the brilliant scientific method of Marxism to the solution of its problems.

“It is being produced in conditions of great difficulty and danger. Nevertheless we mean to go on publishing it, because we know that Africa needs Communist thought, as dry and thirsty soil needs rain.

“To you the reader, we say, comrade

and fellow-worker, wherever you may be, read and study this magazine. Pass it on to fellow-workers and form groups to discuss it. These groups may become the foundation stones of great and important Communist Parties in many lands that will bring salvation to your country.”

That clarion call showed that the AC was not simply meant to be an analytical journal but its purpose was to unite theory with practice and act as an organising vehicle for communists and revolutionaries throughout Africa.

#### **Emergence in the time of illegality**

Let us cast our minds back to the dramatic banning and dissolution of the CPSA in 1950 and the subsequently unannounced reconstitution of the new SACP in 1953. The late Lionel “Rusty” Bernstein in his aptly entitled book, “Memory against Forgetting<sup>vii</sup>” recounted a heated debate at an underground national conference of the Party in a Johannesburg industrial zone in 1959<sup>viii</sup>. At issue was the difficult question whether the Party’s existence should be revealed or not. One side argued that the Party, having proved its ability to survive for six years, needed to announce that it existed and campaign for its own policies in its own name. The counter-argument (led mainly by those with positions in the above-ground Movement) was that the Party’s invisibility had helped build the unity of the mass movement of the 1950s – possibly because in its absence, fears of a separate (and perhaps rival) communist agenda was not apparent to the non-communists in the Alliance<sup>ix</sup>. Announcing the Party’s emergence, it was argued, might additionally induce the legal organisations to openly repudiate co-operation with the SACP in order

to legally protect themselves. (It is not difficult to find similarities in this rationalisation with the view of those who declined to remain Party members at the unbanning in 1990 owing to the effect this might have on their ANC profiles. We may also recognise in the 1959 debate current arguments that have pressed for the Party to contest elections in its own name).

The 1959 debate was almost equally divided between those favouring “emergence” and those against. A compromise proposal was put forward by Bernstein that paved the way for the creation of the AC. He wrote how this helped satisfy both sides of the argument: “The publication of a regular journal of Marxist views on African and international affairs, without any identifying Party label, seemed to take the middle ground. I made the proposal; both sides agreed to it, perhaps as much as a gesture of peace as for its intrinsic merit. ‘Emergence’ was deferred *sine die* and the go-ahead was given for what was to become the African Communist.”<sup>x</sup>

#### **A group of Marxist-Leninists in Africa**

As a result of the compromise the publishers of the first issue of the AC simply styled themselves as “A group of Marxist-Leninists in Africa”. Michael “Mick” Harmel had been appointed editor with Govan Mbeki, Bernstein, Ruth First, Joe Matthews, Duma Nokwe, Brian Bunting and MP Naicker among those either on the editorial board or assisting. Apart from being seasoned Marxist revolutionaries they had honed their writing skills with leftwing journals such as *The Guardian*, *Fighting Talk*, *New Age* and *Liberation*. The first AC was typed, cyclostyled and 25 pages in length. Those with a memory of cyclostyled printing

will know how onerous and dirty the process was. More particularly in circumstances of illegality where great care was needed to avoid tell-tale ink smudges on clothing and hands and where special precautions were required to avoid leaving finger-prints on the illicit material. Producing the 1 000 copies of the first edition would have taken hours of arduous toil under the constant fear of a possible police raid in mind.

Contents of that historic first issue consisted of Editorial Notes under the heading “The New Africa – Capitalist or Socialist?” reflecting the burning issue of the times and the nature of the debates the journal would engage in right up to the present day. “The duty of a Communist”, the editorial ran, “was to study Marxism and the conditions in their own country, and to teach others”. In Africa they additionally needed “to take an active part in the struggles of their people... for national liberation.” This was a task for the whole nation and therefore the Communists “will work to build a United Front of National Liberation, of all classes, workers, peasants, intellectuals and businessmen.” The Communists, however, needed to ensure that the working class “plays an independent and leading part” through the creation of their own political party. “Starting with Marxist study classes, they should aim at building a powerful Communist Party...a Party that will be an essential and vital partner in the United Front.”

To conceal the SACP’s involvement there was only passing mention of the situation in South Africa – where the Treason Trial was still underway, the PAC had split from the ANC, an anti-pass campaign was being planned and combustible conditions were building up to the Sharpeville massacre. There were

only two articles in that inaugural issue. One was entitled “Marxism – The Science of Change” by “Toussaint” which exemplified what would become the ongoing educational preoccupation of the journal. The other was “Uganda – A Survey” by “GM” which was an assessment of prospects for independence. The article pointed to the continental-wide readership the AC sought to reach. In urging for the formation of a “mass national democratic and progressive organisation capable of uniting all classes and groups,” the piece was appealing to militants throughout Africa to do the same in their respective countries. There was also a note on “Problems of the African Revolution” by “George Maxwell.” He argued that “the bourgeoisie have fulfilled their historic role in the African revolution and cannot carry it any further.” He asserted that “In all African countries, particularly in those that are independent, the task must be carried forward of organising the workers as a class.” He emphasised that “This task can only be carried out effectively under the leadership of the Communist Party”, and that “Communist currents and tendencies must now be crystallised into the formation of Communist Parties no matter how small.” He was in effect echoing the argument some had posited at the SACP Conference. His view of the national bourgeoisie’s role bears much relevance to similar arguments arising to this day. His opinion that this class had fulfilled its historic role in Africa proved particularly contentious.

While welcoming Maxwell’s “thoughtful contribution” the Editorial Board saw fit to comment: “[But] we think that some of his statements about the role of the national bourgeoisie in Africa are too sweeping....It is wrong to assume that

the role of the African capitalist class will be content with formal political independence, after which they will compromise with imperialism at the expense of the people...We agree with Comrade Maxwell that the task of the advanced workers in the more developed [African] countries is to form their own independent Communist Parties. But our view is that the principal task of these Parties in the present historical period is to take part in and strengthen the national united front, together with the peasants, the patriotic intellectuals and the democratic sections of the national bourgeoisie, in order to win and secure political independence, as well as to institute a radical programme of land reform and economic development which will make independence a reality.<sup>xii</sup>”

It is quite clear that today’s debates concerning the role of the SACP and of the trade union movement in Alliance with the ANC are echoes of similar debates around class and national struggle of 50 years ago – and which constantly emerged in the pages of the AC. Who then can say that history has no relevance to the challenges we face today, albeit that conditions have changed so enormously? Who can say that those pioneering giants have nothing to teach us about the way in which Marxist theory needs to be creatively applied to the concrete situation? Rusty Bernstein, writing under the pen name “Toussaint”, in that formative first issue, brilliantly conveyed what was integral to Marxist methodology: “Marxist science is not a formula or a catalogue of dogmatic solutions to be applied in every situation like the catechism. Above all else, Marxism teaches that every situation has to be studied concretely in the light of all surrounding circumstances; it teaches us to

not look merely at things as they are, but as they are becoming in the course of their development and change. Clearly the precise understanding of the problems of Africa, even in the light of Marxism, cannot be gleaned from the writing of great Marxists about other countries. Understanding comes from the application of the Marxist science to the concrete problems of Africa.<sup>xii</sup>

#### Early production and distribution

But let us revert to considering the early production of the journal. Rusty Bernstein writes of that first edition: "It had been produced and distributed entirely by the Party in Johannesburg in its first independent but anonymous public action. Harmel edited it, various people wrote articles, and [Andrew] Mlangeni and I organised the production and distribution. Copy printing by wax stencil limited us to around one thousand copies.<sup>xiii</sup>" What Bernstein did not reveal was that he was the anonymous "Toussaint", whom along with Michael Harmel ("Lerumo"), was to become one of the most prolific of the journal's stable of writers.

The issue of the Party's "emergence" that had been deferred *sine die* was brought back onto the agenda more swiftly than those involved in the 1959 debate could have imagined. The Sharpeville shootings and outlawing of the ANC and PAC at the end of March 1960, and declaration of a state of emergency, led to the issuing of the first underground leaflets in the name of the SACP in July. Consequently the AC's third issue (September 1960) revealed that the journal had in fact been launched by the SACP. From that issue to the present every edition of the AC carried the declaration: "Published by

the SACP as a forum for Marxist-Leninist thought".

It was realised that the journal needed to be professionally printed if it was to be widely distributed both within South Africa and abroad. Vella Pillay in London obtained the assistance of the Communist Party of Great Britain. Vella, his wife Patsy, and a handful of Party members studying in London, including Kader Asmal, Wolf East, Mac Maharaj, Steve Naidoo, Martin Bronkhorst and Barry Feinberg became a team assisting with production and posting. They were soon reinforced by Yusuf and Winnie Dadoo, Mannie Brown, Herby Pillay and other exiles. Feinberg and Bronkhorst, both art students, designed covers for the journal<sup>xiv</sup>. The first such edition (No 11, 1962) carried an inspiring image of African guerrillas, and the journal's layout became very professional<sup>xv</sup>. In this writer's view the most memorable cover design was a blood-spattered graphic of a Belgian mercenary stripping an African corpse of a wristwatch in the Congo intervention (No 20, 1965). A member of the British Communist Party, Ellis Bowles, fronted as nominal publisher. From issue No 3 (September 1960 until 1970) his name, with a postal address, featured as the magazine's London agent. The AC became a printed quarterly at the price of one shilling and six pence (just three times the price of a daily newspaper). It was distributed to African countries and the rest of the world. The first illegal copies with black covers were posted from London<sup>xvi</sup>.

With a public address available the 3rd issue of the AC was able to report that the journal: "...has been hailed with joy by revolutionary workers and intellectuals in many parts of our great continent. It has been in the words of one reader,

'like a ray of sunlight piercing through the dark'. 'How can I get more copies?' asks another reader. 'How can I send an article to your magazine? This was difficult, because we could not put any address on our first two issues. Now we have overcome this difficulty by appointing a London agent for our magazine to whom you can write. His address appears on the inside back cover.<sup>18</sup>'

From then on the journal regularly featured reader's letters. A French-language edition with a selection of articles was brought out, as was a Sesotho version of the article "Marxism and National Liberation" by "N. Numade", the pen name of Duma Nokwe<sup>19</sup>.

From its 4<sup>th</sup> issue (January 1962), the AC was published as a quarterly journal. In 1962 Mick Harmel, languishing under house arrest, slipped out of South Africa with the specific task of editing the journal from London. Given the deteriorating security situation in South Africa he was soon joined by other leaders. A growing South African exile community became a valuable support base.

An office was opened in a rather run-down building in Goodge Street, central London, where the rental was cheap. Mick worked there with Sonia Bunting as administrative secretary. This was the AC's home for nearly 20 years. Across the road Yusuf Dadoo and Joe Slovo worked in even more dilapidated premises. Around the corner were offices of the ANC and Anti-Apartheid Movement. Yusuf Dadoo, Joe Slovo, Brian Bunting, Joe Matthews, Rusty Bernstein, Ruth First, Thabo Mbeki, Alan Brooks, Francis Meli, Essop Pahad, Barry Feinberg, Ronnie Kasrils, "Phineas Malinga" and Jabulani Nxumalo (comrade "Mzala"), among others, served on the editorial board at various times. It was

always closely linked with the Party leadership in Dar es Salaam and Lusaka. Most notably over the years: Moses Kotane, J.B.Marks, Duma Nokwe, Moses Mabhida, Dan Tloome, Ray Simons, Thabo Mbeki, John Nkadameng, Eric Mtshali and Josiah Jele among others..

After Harmel's deployment to Prague in 1970, Brian Bunting took over duties as Editor and carried on in that capacity until 1990. For almost the entire period of exile the Goodge Street premises, with Sonia Bunting in attendance, remained the only public address of the SACP. By the end of 1988 the AC moved to larger but still shabby premises in Archway, North London. George Johannes, of the ANC Youth Section, was employed there as Sonia's assistant. The AC was printed in the German Democratic Republic from mid-1965 until 1990, free of charge as a generous fraternal contribution by the Socialist Unity Party of that country. Copies were forwarded in bulk from the Leipzig printers (Interdruck) to London for distribution worldwide. AC No 124 (First Quarter 1991) was the first issue totally edited, produced and printed inside South Africa since the 1959 cyclostyled edition. The last Editorial Board that operated from Britain consisted of Brian and Sonia Bunting, Rusty Bernstein, "Phineas Malinga", Francis Meli, Essop Pahad and Barry Feinberg.

#### **Post from Pluto**

From the Goodge Street office cartons of specially printed illegal editions of the AC were transported to the homes of Party members around London. Units would meet to package and despatch consignments to safe addresses in Lusaka, Maputo and Harare. From there copies were ferried on to safe houses in

Swaziland, Botswana and Lesotho for further distribution into South Africa. Chris Hani, Lambert Maloi and Charles Setsubi ran a tight organisation in Lesotho smuggling literature home.

The London units addressed a variety of stamped envelopes for posting to newspapers, organisations, academics and trade unions in South Africa. Copies were posted to a random selection of pro-government individuals so that the police could not conclude that everyone on the receiving end were subversive elements. These were posted from different localities around Britain, and sometimes from Ireland, France and Holland, to make it harder for the authorities to intercept them. Even the most senior leaders such as Dadoo, Bunting and Slovo did their stint, licking stamps and sealing envelopes alongside the rank and file. It is fitting to note the tireless role of Stephanie Kemp in this activity. Jack Hodgson, assisted by Aziz Pahad, Abdulhay Jasset and Barry Feinberg, prepared suitcases with false bottoms for couriers travelling to South Africa. The French phrase "*porteur de valise*" (literally "baggage carriers") was the term employed to describe the internationalists who carried funds and material from France to Algerian guerrillas during the war of liberation. During our struggle such agents were recruited from many different countries and on arrival in South Africa would often simply purchase stamps and post the material to select addresses. Harmless bucket-bombs were later used to great effect to deliver literature and leaflets in public places. The grave danger involved was evidenced by the deaths in detention of communist martyrs such as Elijah Loza, Storey Mazwembe, Lumka Huna and Ahmed Timol all involved in distribution

of Party material including the AC. Others arrested included comrades such as Raymond Suttner, David and Sue Rabkin, Jeremy Cronin, Anthony Holiday, Tim Jenkins and Stephen Lee. They specialised in underground production and distribution.

At his trial Raymond Suttner gave a graphic description of the arduous nature of such activity: "The work that I have done for the freedom movement made rigorous demands. It was not pleasant to spend my spare time licking envelopes, duplicating, typing, and sticking on stamps. It is true that I need not have done this. But this was the course that I honestly concluded to be the best way of contributing to our future.<sup>20</sup>"

Internationalists like Alex Moumbaris who was Greek and Sean Hosey, a young Irishman, were arrested and sentenced to stiff terms of imprisonment for assisting MK combatants. But as *porteur de valise* they were also active participants in a network of internationalists involved in smuggling Party and ANC literature and setting-off the bucket bombs and other paraphernalia<sup>21</sup>.

Landing in apartheid South Africa was a strange experience for politically conscious visitors confronted by the separate amenities for "whites only." One of these comrades was roughed up by police for inadvertently standing in a post office queue for "nie blankes" (non-whites). Another commented to me that arriving in apartheid South Africa was like "descending from another planet". We consequently came to refer to these couriers as "Postmen from Pluto" – our version of *porteur de valaise*. Dockers in Britain's ports, and from the Seamen's Union, placed literature in the cargo of ships bound for South Africa<sup>22</sup>. Merchant seamen would nonchalantly am-

ble from their ships berthed in South African ports and post our literature under the noses of the police.

#### **Names behind the pen**

Mick Harmel's favourite nom-de-plume was "A Lerumo" and he and Rusty Bernstein, writing as "Toussaint", contributed more than 25 articles apiece using those two pen names alone. They both certainly wrote under other assumed names. Pseudonyms were commonly used owing to security requirements, although in some cases real names were used when the gist of what was written was already associated with the writer's public presentations at seminars, etc. A notable example was Joe Slovo who used the pen name of "Sol Dubula." Joe ranks as one of the most creative Marxist thinkers produced by our Party. Among his most internationally acclaimed articles were "Latin America and the Ideas of Regis Debray" (AC No 33) and "Has Socialism Failed?" (AC No 121). Ben Turok has referred to the latter as a "bombshell to the Party and the world Communist movement." (AC No 175 of 2008). Francis Meli and "Mzala" used their popular MK aliases from the start. What is notable about Mick Harmel is that apart from editing the AC from 1959 to 1970, and being responsible for most of the editorial notes in that period, he found time to contribute under other *noms de plume* such as "A Doyle" (on his native Ireland) and probably (owing to subject matter and style) as "Terence Africanus." He also wrote "Fifty Fighting Years," the Party's history from 1921-1971<sup>23</sup>. Noteworthy too is that Joe Matthews was both "GM" and "George Maxwell" contributing to the historic first issue of the AC. Matthews authored many later articles

under the pen-name "Albert Zanzolo".

Recent enquiry allows the identification of several other contributors. There is no need to keep such identities secret except where requested. Identification is not simply to pay tribute to their efforts but to assist researchers to follow clues of writing style, and trace the influence of such authors on policy. Those listed below are just a few contributors using pen names we have been able to identify. Three distinct generations are represented: leaders from the 1940-50s; the 1960s generation; the 1976 generation:

Foremost were Mick Harmel ("Lerumo", "A Doyle", "Terence Africanus"), Brian Bunting ("Z. Nkosi"), Joe Slovo ("Sol Dabula"), Ray Simons who generally wrote on trade unionism ("RE Braverman", "RS Nyameko" and also as "JRS" in collaboration with her husband Jack), Duma Nokwe ("N Numade) and Alex La Guma ("Gala") writing on cultural issues. Joe Matthews ("George Maxwell", "Albert Zanzolo"), and Vella Pillay ("P Tlale") were notable contributors before they left the Party. Jack Simons and Ronnie Press wrote under their own names. Norman Levy "L.N." wrote numerous book reviews. Albie Sachs (wrote as "Spectator" about Mozambique but did not remain a Party member after leaving South Africa); and Arthur Goldreich wrote from Israel ("Samuel Ben Adam"). Ruth First, Hilda Bernstein, Govan Mbeki and Dan Tloome undoubtedly contributed but the pen names they used could not be ascertained. Josiah Jele assisted Mick Harmel with editorial notes on the World Peace Movement from his position in that body, which was based in Helsinki. "Phineas Malinga" and "A Langa" are known to the writer but could not be reached to obtain permis-

sion for identification.

Among this group was Thabo Mbeki ("JJ Jabulani"), Kader Asmal ("L Legwa") Essop Pahad ("Ahmed Azad"), Ronnie Kasrils ("ANC Khumalo", "Alexander Sibeko", "MK Mtungwa" and as "RK"), John Hoffman ("Dialego"), Alan Madolwana was the actual name of "Francis Meli", Alan Brooks ("AB"), Barry Feinberg ("Scarlet Whitman") and Sylvia Neame (Theresa Zania). Herby Pillay and Billy Nannan contributed but their pen names could not be traced. Aziz Pahad was one of the many who wrote "Africa Notes." Rob Davies simply used the byline "Reader" of Maputo. Chris Hani writing as "Magqabi Tshonyane" provided a commemorative article on MK's 25th Anniversary.

The most prolific of the 1976 generation was Jabulani Nxumalo ("Mzala", "Khumalo Migwe", "Sisa Majola", "Jabulani Mkhathshwa"). Additionally there were: Joel Netshitenzhe ("Denga"), James Ngculu ("Mthetheleli"), Edwin Mabitsetla ("Moyahabo"), David Rabkin ("Rob Dyson" and "Langa Mzansi"), Jeremy Cronin (Benjamin Molapo); Janet Love ("Lerato"), Jenny Schreiner ("An Underground Comrade"). "Rosita" was an MK cadre known as Jessica. January Masilela ("Che Ogara"), Muzi Ngwenya (better known as known as Thami Zulu) and Dumisani Makhaye – all prematurely deceased – used pen names which unfortunately have not been identified.

Many of the above, among others, wrote book reviews, often simply using initials or no name at all. The journal consistently published relevant speeches, messages and articles from national and international figures ranging from Luthuli, Tambo, Mandela, Fischer, Kotane, Cabral, Neto, Nyerere, Ben Bella, Nasser, Nkrumah, Fidel Castro,

Khrushchev, Brezhnev, Ho Chi Minh and other leaders from the socialist world, to writers such as Du Bois, Woddis, Idris Cox, William Pomeroy, Angela Davis, Palme Dutt, Henri Alleg, John Garang, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Meir Vilner, Boris Ponomaryov, R Ulyanovsky etc.

### Milestones

Every decade of the AC's appearance was celebrated as an important milestone of its existence. The titles resound with the pride of achievement: "Our First Ten Years" (AC No 39), "We Celebrate our Twentieth Birthday!" (AC No 79), "Thirty Years of Victory" (AC No 119), "Forty Years of the African Communist" (AC No 152). A celebratory hundredth issue coinciding with the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the AC No 100 (First Quarter 1985) carried an article "The Mirror of our Times" by the prolific "Toussaint"<sup>24</sup>.

In this piece "Toussaint" reflected: "The conditions which made an Editorial Board in exile a matter of survival – not choice – are being demolished by the rising struggles inside South Africa. The time and opportunity for the return of the Editorial Board [to South Africa] cannot now be far away."<sup>25</sup>

The AC has never been a profit-seeking magazine and those few who worked full-time did so for an extremely modest salary, backed-up by countless volunteers from many countries. In the thirty years of its clandestine existence the journal carried forward and developed the essential body of theory, principles and concepts of struggle that helped bring about liberation. It provided not only penetrating interpretations of African and international developments; numerous study series on Marxism-Leninism; views on nation, class and colonialism of a special type;

the non-capitalist path of development; role of the working class and trade union movement; theories and debates around armed revolutionary struggle; and excellent book reviews; but in particular focussed on the prescient analysis of the growing contradictions of the apartheid regime and the rising strength of the forces of revolution. In three decades of underground publication it never missed a deadline. The ACs continued publication today in conditions of legality rests on that legacy. We salute and honour all who contributed, who helped in writing, production and distribution. It is only fitting that we pay special tribute to the memory of Mick Harmel (“Lerumo”) and Brian Bunting (“Z Nkosi”), the two editors who steered the ship during the era of illegality; as well as Rusty Bernstein (“Toussaint”), who often acted as assistant editor; and Sonia Bunting the lone administrative secretary for virtually that entire period. Theirs was a truly sterling contribution.

It is important to point out that as great writers along with such as Joe Matthews, Moses Kotane, Ruth First, Govan Mbeki, Hilda Bernstein, Dan Tloome and Duma Nokwe etc. They were products of an active liberation press and carried on the traditions learnt in the production of earlier Party and leftwing journals. What is worrying in today’s South Africa is the absence (with a few exceptions) of a thriving leftwing, print media capable of producing a new generation of Marxist writers.

#### **Content and Index 1959-1989**

Indispensable as a guide to the journal is the special catalogue entitled “*The African Communist Content and Index 1959-1988*” produced to coincide with the 30th year of publication<sup>26</sup>. The number of is-

sues covered by the Index is 115. Indispensable to the researcher, the Index was the voluntary labour of Mervyn Bennun. For his pains he was given the task of writing the 30th anniversary article, entitled “30 Years of Victory”<sup>27</sup>. That was No 119, the last edition of the journal to be published clandestinely. However, it was printed in London for another year before being published at home<sup>28</sup>.

The Foreword to the Index states: “It is hoped that this Index will ease the task of scholars and activists wishing to study the development of the policies of the SACP during the period covered.” The Index needs to be updated to embrace 50 years of unique history. It is imperative that complete sets of *the African Communist* be safely stored and that the Party’s library and archival material be professionally organised. We need to continue with the start we have made of identifying more of those who wrote using pen names.”

#### **Corruption or revolution?**

Life and struggle are inevitably accompanied by both achievements and setbacks. Some of our expectations were realised and others were dashed – none more so than the collapse of the Soviet Union. Expectations concerning Africa’s development have also not materialised as expected. Clearly international capitalism was much stronger and resilient than anticipated. Nevertheless we got many things right. This included the triumph of the liberation struggles of our region and none more so than the conviction that that we would sweep the Apartheid system into the dustbin of history. Our Marxist analysis that the inherent contradictions within capitalism were irresolvable and needed to be replaced by socialism have proved correct.

Russia is re-emerging on the global scene and with China is challenging the hegemony of USA imperialism; the world has experienced the greatest financial crisis since the Great Depression; the USA is bogged down in Afghanistan and its bloody intervention in the Middle East. Whatever the errors or miscalculations, *the African Communist* sought to convey the truth in service of the people's cause.

Marxism emphasises that the material conditions of life are the basis for change. Our journal has written much about that. Whilst we also stressed the importance of the subjective factor perhaps too much was taken for granted concerning the moral integrity of revolutionaries. No revolution is possible without revolutionaries. So much depends on human beings and their willingness to remain true to their principles. From the early days the AC warned about the pitfalls of bribery and corruption and against settling for political without economic change.

"Toussaint" who had written an article for the very first issue of the AC in 1959 ("Marxism – The Science of Change"), fittingly contributed a prescient article when the journal returned home in 1991, entitled "The Corridors of Corruption"<sup>29</sup>. This *was* the very first issue to be totally edited, produced and published in South Africa after thirty years. He reflected on the failure of Soviet Communism, and betrayal by corruption. He saw warning signals as we prepared to take power: "I want to draw on factors which can be seen in embryo in our own South African liberation movement...the subtle process by which the fore-taste of power corrupts seems to be creeping upon us unnoticed. We ignore the warning signals at our peril. Unless we can identify and eliminate the

factors which have corrupted good honest leaders and organisations elsewhere, we could well repeat the experience of their decline and fall."

The article concluded as follows: "We can benefit now from the examples of those who have not tackled the problem in Eastern Europe, and in newly independent Africa. Their experience demonstrates the corrupting consequence of simply taking the trappings of capitalist power over into a new social order. Thus we have the chance to seal off in advance the Corridors of Corruption, where others tried and failed. Or simply never tried at all. It is a challenge which calls for our utmost seriousness. It demands that we debate the matter openly, without personalities, recriminations or personal ambitions. It also demands that we measure ourselves against the standards of honesty, incorruptibility and dedication which we expect – and generally get – from our leaders; and that we understand the pressures that they will be subject to if we cannot find the right answers. The task is nothing less than setting the world of liberation and of socialism on a new path, where dreams of power without the corrupting restraints of the old order can be made real. Real people's power!"

For a similar warning let us also note the views of Lucio Lara, Agostinho Neto's most trusted comrade. Lara had been interviewed by Joe Slovo in 1978, in an up-beat exchange about the victory of the Angolan Revolution<sup>30</sup>. Seventeen years later Lara was again interviewed for *the African Communist*; by British writer and activist, Victoria Brittain. Seeking to explain what had become of the great liberating ideals of the MPLA, he reminisced: "I don't have illusions about many things any more. In the An-

golan struggle perhaps we didn't have philosophers or sociologists, but we had those words of Neto's: 'The most important thing is to solve the people's problems.' Once in the Council of Ministers I heard someone say that we should stop using this phrase. I thought maybe he was right because no one spoke against him. In my opinion that was when the Party began to collapse. The leaders felt they all had the right to be rich."<sup>31</sup>

No doubt both Rusty Bernstein and Lucio Lara would approve of the concerns raised by Cosatu General Secretary Zwelinzima Vavi and the statement of his ANC counterpart and SACP Chairman, Gwede Mantashe: "The biggest threat to our movement is the intersection between business interests and holding of public office. It is frightening to observe the speed with which the election to a position is seen to be the creation of an opportunity for accumulation (of wealth)...If we do not deal decisively with this tendency, the ANC will only move one way, that is downward<sup>32</sup>.

We are dutybound to stick to the commitment exemplified by Neto's words. The mission is not about enjoying the trappings of power and becoming rich but of serving the people. That has been the purpose of our Party and *the African Communist*. We look to another half-century of publication, believing that our principles and revolutionary morality are sacrosanct, and that "Africa needs communism as dry and sandy soil needs rain." ★

*Cde Kasrils is a former Central Committee and Politburo member and an ANC and MK veteran*

#### Endnotes:

- 1: "The Underground Voice" by Alexander Sibeko, AC No 68, 1977; and "The AC Returns Home", No 124, 1991.
- 2: "The Underground Voice" *ibid*. "Sibeko" reported in this article that the first edition of the AC to be reproduced in pocket-size was No 46, 1971.
- 3: *Ibid*
- 4: *ibid* – police evidence at the trial of Jeremy Cronin, David and Sue Rabkin.
- 5: No 100, 1985
- 6: No 1, October 1959
- 7: See also the article by Toussaint, "A Mirror of our Times" on the first 25 years of the AC – No 100, first quarter 1985. "Toussaint" was Bernstein's favourite pen name
- 8: This could have been either Julius First's factory or the brickworks owned by Wolfie Kodesh's family
- 9: ANC, Indian Congress, Coloured People's Congress, Congress of Democrats, South African Congress of Trade Unions
- 10: "Memory Against Forgetting: Memoirs from a Life in South African Politics 1938-1964", by Rusty Bernstein, Viking, p133
- 11: No 1, 1959: Toussaint;
- 12: Toussaint "Marxism – The Science of Change" *ibid*
- 13: "Memory Against Forgetting" p134. Rusty mistakenly refers to Mlangeni. He almost certainly meant Elias Motsoaledi, who was crucially involved in this work with Wolfie Kodesh.
- 14: Early editions also stated that it was published "in the interests of African solidarity"
- 15: In later years Norman Kaplan assisted with the artwork
- 16: "Time To Tell": An Activists Story, by Barry Feinberg, STE, pp59-61

- 17: *Ibid* and see also “Shades of Difference: Mac Maharaj and the Struggle for South Africa”, by Pádraig O’Malley, Viking, p85
- 18: No 3, September 1960
- 19: No 2, April 1960
- 20: No 65, 1976
- 20: No 65, 1976
- 21: *Hosey was sentenced to five years and Mounbaris to fifteen. The latter managed to escape from Pretoria Central Prison after serving seven years of his sentence. Both were members of the British Communist Party.*
- 22: *Amongst these were London dockworkers’ leader Danny Lyons, and Jack Coward of the Seamen’s Union (who had served with the International Brigade in Spain), and Bill McCaigh ( both of Liverpool). Bill also operated within South Africa during 1969-71, narrowly escaping arrest when Mounbaris was captured. All were members of the CPGB*
- 23: *Michael Harmel died in Prague in 1974, where he had been deployed as SACP member on the editorial board of “The World Marxist Review”*
- 24: *“Our First Ten Years” No 39, 1969; “We Celebrate our Twentieth Birthday” No 79, 1979); “Thirty Years of Victory”, by Mervyn Bennun No 119, 1989; “Forty Years of the African Communist” No 152, 1999; “A Mirror of our Times – The African Communist’s First 25 Years” by Toussaint, No 100, 1985*
- 25: Toussaint, *ibid.*
- 26: *Published by Inkululeko Publications, 1989*
- 27: *No 119, October*
- 28: *No 124, 1<sup>st</sup> Quarter, 1991*
- 29: *No 124, First Quarter 1991. This was the very first issue to be totally edited, produced and published in South Africa after thirty years*
- 30: *“How the Angolan Revolution was Built; AC No 74, 1978*
- 31: *See “Death of Dignity” by Victoria Brittain” Pluto Press, page 95; and AC, 3<sup>rd</sup> Quarter, . 1995*
- 32: *Gwede Mantashe, Cape Times, September 18, 2009*

## 50 YEARS OF AC

## The SACP, the Alliance and *The African Communist*

Through AC the Party sought to advance, but not impose, progressive positions in the broader movement, writes **Ben Turok**

The Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) operated as a conventional political party until it was outlawed in 1950 under the Suppression of Communism Act. Thus its decisions are available to us including the largely ignored but seminal debate in the Executive Committee in 1948. Unfortunately the report is not readily available but a record exists of two resolutions on whether the class or national issue was primary. Yusuf Dadoo defended the latter position and won (Ben Turok, *Strategic Problems of the SA Liberation Struggle*, 1974 p21). Thereafter, although different emphases continued to plague the Party, as we shall see below, the way was clear for the Party to align itself without reservations with the ANC.

When the Party was reconstituted as an illegal body in the early 1950s, it had lost some of its more cautious leaders but gave greater influence to some African personalities, among them Moses Kotane, J B Marks, and Dan Tloome. Michael Harmel was one of the strongest personalities in the new leadership and rapidly rose to being its most articulate and influential intellectual. Yusuf Dadoo became Chairperson formally at the first Party confer-

ence in 1953 and was an important link to the ANC.

In a short time, through very selective recruiting, the Party established a network of cells of about four comrades each throughout the country. In a few years, the Congress Alliance was established, led by the ANC and consisting of the Indian Congress, the Coloured People's Congress, the Congress of Democrats and the SA Congress of Trade Unions. The Party, now called the SACP, was not represented as it was illegal, but the moderate elements in the ANC would not have agreed to its joining the Alliance anyway.

Yet the Party was highly influential and adopted a style of work which worked very well. First it has to be emphasized that it enforced strictly the rule that entryism was unacceptable, namely there should be no capture of any organisation or committee. Participation of Communists was always in good faith and in conformance with the objectives of the other organisation, not that of the Party. If a Communist was elected to a senior position, even its leader, his/her conduct had to be in accordance with the objectives and style of that organisation, not the Party. It was in this spirit that Moses Kotane, for instance, took a senior position

in the ANC even as he was the secretary general of the Party. The code for Communist cadres was well set out in an internal memo by the SACP Central Committee in 1967 (T. Karis and G. Gerhart, *From Protest to Challenge*, Vol 5 1974-1979, p372).

However the Party constantly discussed the work of the Alliance components and indeed other organisations such as the Peace movement, and used its influence to pursue progressive policies. Party cells spent much time analysing the work of other organisations in order to improve their work. Much thought was given to which cadres, party or non-party, were the most suitable for office, and how the particular organisation could be more effective.

Much attention was also given to ideological work, although the channels available were only those operating in the public domain, such as the weekly *Guardian*, the monthly *Fighting Talk* and the occasional *Liberation*, all of which were edited by Party comrades. These journals promoted broadly progressive policies, including those on international issues, but always within the broad confines of what was acceptable in the Congress Alliance.

At the same time, illegal study groups were set up for weekly discussions of Marxist texts thus advancing the ideological positions of the Communist movement worldwide. Many non-Party cadres in the Alliance were brought into these groups and then recruited into the Party, depending on their suitability and trustworthiness. Throughout the 1950s, the Party operated effectively without even the most senior members of the Congress Alliance being aware of its existence.

The drafting of the Freedom Charter posed an opportunity for the advancement of a mass-based broadly progressive

position within the Alliance. To this end comrades were sent to the far corners of the country to collect “demands” drawn up at meetings, large and small, which represented the views of ordinary people, rather than the views of top leadership which might have been skewed by what they perceived to be good policy.

However, the outcome was received with reservations, especially the economic clause, by some of the conservative leaders in the ANC, who then had to be persuaded that the document was not “socialist”. An article in the *New Age*, *Does the Freedom Charter mean Socialism?* (November 17, 1957), stated that “some of our most respected leaders have expressed genuine misgivings” about the economics clause, and, even though “This Charter proclaims that only a complete change of state form can result in the people achieving their aims . . . the Charter does not advocate the abolition of private enterprise, nor is it suggested that all industries be nationalised or that all trade be controlled by the state.”

Then came the Treason Trial in which the prosecution tried to argue that the ANC was driven by a Communist agenda, but failed to prove this despite desperate efforts by Professor Murray and others.

During this period the Party exercised great care to take a back seat as is well illustrated by the description of its activities by A Lerumo (Michael Harmel) in *Fifty Fighting Years: the Communist Party of South Africa 1921-1971*. Harmel reports on the emergence of *the African Communist* in October 1959, a hugely significant event, in the briefest of mentions and it is not even listed in the Index (p105).

Brian Bunting elaborated on this in his book *Moses Kotane* stating that the first issue of the AC was cyclostyled, “bore no imprint of either publisher or printer, and

gave no indication that it emanated from South Africa.” The second issue appeared in April 1960. It was printed, but bore no imprint. It was only in Issue no 3 in September 1960, that it acknowledged that it was published “in the interests of African solidarity, and as a forum for Marxist-Leninist thought throughout our continent, by the South African Communist Party” (p254).

The State of Emergency of 1960 saw a major crisis for the movement and the Party. By good luck and some good management, a small core of Party cadres evaded arrest and set up a CP Secretariat underground in Johannesburg consisting of Moses Kotane, Michael Harmel and Ben Turok. This group managed to function throughout the Emergency, even establishing contact with structures elsewhere in the then Transvaal and other provinces.

An extended meeting of the leadership was convened which included Bram Fischer and Joe Matthews at which the role of the CP was discussed in some detail. Harmel argued that there was no indication how long the Emergency would last and that the Party should give leadership directly to the people. This was a momentous proposal for a Party which had been operating secretly for nearly a decade. However it was agreed to and arrangements set in motion for the distribution of a leaflet declaring the existence of the Party and giving leadership to the masses. Harmel gave little space to the event in *Fifty Fighting Years* merely saying, “The Communist Party . . . came out with its first illegal leaflets for mass distribution in all the main industrial regions of the country (p105).”

Another issue that arose in the Secretariat was the perspectives of the movement should the Emergency continue for a long time. It was argued that the regime

was determined to stamp out all legal protests, leaving very little room for the movement to operate in. It was suggested that the resort to violent action might be considered in due course (see also Harmel, p105).

When the Emergency was lifted after five months, the movement regrouped, though the ANC and COD (Congress of Democrats) were made illegal. The ANC called a three day stay-away but this was heavily disrupted by state agencies which arrested organisers, making non-violent protest virtually impossible.

A secret meeting of top cadres nationally was called, and Walter Sisulu proposed a turn to violence in the form of sabotage and the creation of an armed force. Although he was by then a member of the Party leadership, he was acting in his capacity of ANC Secretary General.

Shortly thereafter Umkhonto WeSizwe was formed as an underground sabotage organisation leading to the first actions on 16 December 1961. The subsequent history has been told by others and it only remains to report that a group prepared a document called Operation Mayebuye in which Party leaders played a principle role although some subsequently stated that it was never adopted formally. The plan was very ambitious and unrealizable. It was to be further discussed when many other leaders went into exile.

Perhaps the greatest tribute to the Communist Party was paid by Nelson Mandela in his trial when he said that the Party had for very many years fought side by side with Congress; many Africans equated Communism with Freedom. The AC noted editorially, “What emerged in the course of this historic trial was a true reflection of the South African liberation movement: of an unbreakable unity tried and proven in the most severe and pro-

tracted tests over the past forty years, a unity of African, Indian and Coloured people, and the consistently democratic Whites, of Communists and non-Communists, of African nationalists, principled trade unionists and upholders of the ethic of human brotherhood contained in various religious beliefs (July 1964., p12).”

After being outlawed, the Party was reconstituted as a small contingent of highly disciplined cadres, most of whom were working in the broader liberation movement. Although the Party intervened in these organisations it was mainly through the influence of these individuals without ever attempting to change the character of these organisations. Perhaps even more important, the Party sought to constantly advance progressive ideological positions within the broader movement, particularly through the AC, without imposing them.

This spirit is well reflected in Harmel's statement, “The African Communist has for more than a decade helped to spread the enlightening ideas of Marxism Leninism in Africa and among Africans and other interested thinkers in every part of the world ( *Fifty Fighting Years*, p 107) .”

The Party was convinced that ideological work was vitally important, even if the Party itself exercised great discretion and was unable to propagate it directly. A statement in January 1950 said: “Our Party must give more attention to the ideological struggle in the national movements than it has been receiving. In particular we must make a practice of using immediate and critical comment on the statements by bourgeois leaders . . . Above all, it is for us to develop in the workers of all races a positive class consciousness, based on the unity of the African, Indian, European and

Coloured proletariat against capitalism and for socialism (Bunting, p165).”

Nevertheless the Party and *the African Communist* increasingly recognised that the national character of the struggle was primary, and class analysis should not displace national objectives in these organisations. Furthermore the Party sought to always maintain a discrete presence, and never displace the leading role of the ANC.

In April 1963 the AC wrote “Certainly there is a large area of agreement between the Communist Party and the ANC on policy and strategy. But this is certainly not because either organisation controls the other; it is because like the ANC, we of the SACP, regard as our ‘immediate and foremost task’ a united front of national liberation to destroy white domination and achieve a national democratic revolution, whose main content will be the national liberation of the African people (p15).” ★

*Cde Turok is a former member of the SACP Central Committee and the Editorial Board of AC, and an MK veteran*

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**50 YEARS OF AC**

## **AC should return to its roots**

In this interview, SACP veteran **Eric Mtshali** argues that AC should return to an approach which made it like 'rays of sunshine piercing the dark'

**When did you join the Communist Party and why?**

(Laughter) I did not join the Communist Party. I was recruited into the underground structure in 1954. I attended some political classes that were useful to me because I was a trade unionist. After a while, somebody approached me to join the Party. It was a surprise. To me it was a dream come true. I've been loyal to the Party ever since. I didn't experience what the present generation does – of fighting for positions and so on. To me it was enough that I'd been recruited into the Communist Party. In 1970, I was elected to the Central Committee at the Congress held in Moscow. To me it was a very significant Congress – first because it was in Moscow and secondly, in a guesthouse that was used by Stalin when he was General-Secretary.

**Did you play a role in the launch of the African Communist?**

No. I didn't even know that the Party was thinking of launching *The African Communist*. But I remember that six copies of the first issue of *African Communist* were brought to me and I distributed them, but made sure that I wouldn't get caught. I remember that that first issue said

something like, "like rays of sunshine piercing through the dark" and when I read it, it was indeed like rays of sunshine, because it answered many questions for me. I was young then, and not experienced in the Communist Party. But I liked the AC from the start. We used the AC for educational purposes. We discussed it in our underground unit time and time again. We read all the issues, and we even sold them underground.

**So who do you remember to be key in distributing AC?**

Well, I know Mike Harmel was key to the AC.

**How was the AC distributed in Natal?**

It was the late Jerry Khumalo – he was a leader in the Underground District Committee in Durban. So Jerry Khumalo would bring them to our Unit and then we would also distribute them. But we didn't know where he got them from. We knew he was in the District Committee but who was in the District Committee, we didn't know and it was not our business to know. So then we distributed them, not like now, but to a select few.

**What was the impact of the**

**distribution?**

AC had a great impact on both workers and intellectuals who got it because it addressed the questions they were interested in. It also acted as a collective organiser for the Party. For the first time there was a journal in South Africa that did not only deal with South African problems, but problems of the African continent. It explained many problems of the African continent, political problems, economic problems, and so on.

**When did you leave the country and why?**

In 1961 MP Naicker was the Chairperson of the District Committee of the Communist Party in Durban. He called me to his office. He was Editor of *New Age* then – and he told me that the Party wanted some young men to volunteer to join the military wing of the ANC, MK. I did not hesitate. I welcomed it. I don't know whether at the time I knew what I was doing, or not (laughter), or it was because of my youth, or what, but I accepted readily. So he then told me that somebody would come and train us in underground work. Then there was this Comrade, I remember, he was called "Desert Rat" – I forgot his real name – but we used to call him "Desert Rat" because he fought in Al Alamein during the Second World War. He was a member of the Party. He came to Durban, and I was told to be at such and such a place at such and such a time and when I got there, I found Ronnie Kasrils, Curnick Ndlovu, Solly Mbanjwa and Bruno Mtolo, the last two of whom sold out the struggle. There were five of us and he took us for a short course on manufacturing home-made explosives. Later our Unit began recruiting others, but then at the beginning of 1962 I was called by the District and told that I was selected

to be among the Party comrades to go for military training in the Soviet Union. It was an exciting thing for me. So five of us from Durban left in July 1962. We were joined by others in Johannesburg, and left the country.

**What was your experience of African Communist during the years of exile?**

*The African Communist* was very popular. It was used like a textbook in the camps, teaching politics. It was distributed at the University of Dar es Salaam. It was popular with students there and academics. But, it was not very popular with the leadership of the ANC (laughter), not at all. But many comrades got their education through the AC, even those who were not members of the Party, especially those in MK. And it had lots of articles on Africa. Ghana had just been liberated, articles on Ethiopia and all parts of Africa. We were real African Communists. The AC brought us closer to Africa and to the world.

**Did the AC have weaknesses? If so, what?**

Yes. One weakness was that it was only in English. The large part of Africa is French-speaking. So it did not reach French-speaking and also Arab-speaking Africa. But the Party had no money. So it was going to be impossible to publish it in other languages.

**What impact do you think the AC had on progressive people in Africa and elsewhere in the Third World?**

It was distributed to many universities in Africa and the Third World. I know that there were Marxist Study Groups using AC in places like Madagascar, Ghana and Sudan. The Communist Party in Sudan used AC a great deal. I remember they used to order in bulk and our comrades in

Ghana too. Lesotho also used AC a lot. I was there in 1960 when the Communist Party of Lesotho was formed underground.

**How do you respond to the view that the AC was too uncritical of the Soviet Union?**

(Laughter) You know the younger generations in the Party call me a Stalinist. They think I'm too straight. I'm very loyal – my love for the Soviet Union is unshakable. Maybe I'm not the right person to answer this question. I lived in the Soviet Union. I trained there in the military school and Party schools. So you can see that it is difficult to properly answer that question. There were things I didn't like in the Soviet Union, but on the whole, to me, the Soviet Union was a good example of socialism. So it was right that the AC was pro-Soviet. The Soviet Union and the Soviet Communist Party did everything for our Revolution. There was a time when in Tanzania, when MK was maintained by the Soviet Union. No other country in the West was prepared to help. They were supplying us with uniforms, medicine, foodstuff, with everything. Later other Socialist countries helped and the Scandinavian countries too.

**So what do you think of the AC since 1990?**

I see a decline in the quality. It's not the same as it was. It's a little bit low-quality now.

**How do you think we can improve the African Communist?**

We need to intensify political education in the branches. The AC must be used for that purpose. And that's not happening at the moment. We should also try to publish it in the African languages. I know that will be expensive. But we can have at least some articles in every issue in some of the African languages. We can rotate the languages. There are good comrades in the Party who don't write for AC because it's in English. But they can write in their own languages.

**Is there anything else you'd like to say about AC?**

We should go back to the roots of the AC, to the fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism. We should also write more about the history of the Party, and also have a Marxist approach to the history of the ANC. ★

*Cde Mtshali is a veteran SACP Central Committee and MK member*

## 50 YEARS OF AC

## ***The African Communist, African Unity and the Soviet Union***

**Essop Pahad** recalls AC's consistent support for a united continent, and unwavering commitment to the Soviet Union

In reflecting upon *the African Communist* in exile, the author will concentrate on two aspects of a rich, proud, unflinching tradition of good writing, hard-headed analysis and unwavering support for Marxism-Leninism, the World Communist Movement, national liberation movements, peace, democracy and social progress. The two aspects are African Unity, and the Soviet Union and other socialist countries.

From its inception the AC commented on, analysed and gave guidance to revolutionaries in Africa on developments in Southern Africa, the continent and the world. Coverage of developments in Africa was wide, incisive and driven by unqualified support for anti-colonial, anti-imperialist national liberation movements, progressive forces, in particular those guided by the science of Marxism-Leninism and a trenchant critique of imperialism and its destabilisation of the African continent. The author will quote extensively from the pages of the AC so that militants of the movement get to feel the texture, flavour, and language and the passionate way in which the SACP and AC portrayed the ongoing quest for African unity and the developments in the Soviet Union, the other socialist countries and the

world communist movement.

### **African unity**

Notwithstanding the vicissitudes, trials and tribulations, fractious divisions, conflicts and imperialist machinations the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) remained the focal point for continental unity and cohesion. In its pages the AC remained steadfast in its support for African unity and in offering theoretical and ideological guidance to revolutionaries in Africa. Over time the language changed, the depth of analysis varied and the coverage of concrete experiences inconsistent, but the strategic approach remained consistent.

In one of its earliest issues (No 4, 1963) the editor commented upon the historic first summit of African States, held in Addis Ababa, May 1963. It was the conference where Ben Bella, the Algerian leader, electrified the conference and sliced through the complacency and comfort zones of some leaders when he declared that it was more important “to establish a blood-bank for freedom fighters than to set up an all-African Development Bank.”

In its concluding paragraph the editor remarked “Addis Ababa 1963, therefore marked an important and historic mile-

stone on the road to African unity. But it also showed that that road still has a long and difficult stretch ahead before we reach our goal – and that that road has to run through Salisbury, Cape Town, Lourenco Marques and Luanda before it is ended.”

In an editorial *Turbulent Africa* (No 16, 1964) three phases of African liberation are outlined. Phase one is characterised Anti Colonialist, the second Social Revolution and the third African Unity and Socialism. At first glance this methodological approach is too schematic and orderly. But in the same article the editor writes more perceptively even if over-optimistically when he asserts: “The course of our torrential freedom-river does not and cannot run smooth, nor can it conform exactly to the path we may seek to lay down for it in advance, for life is always more complex, varied and rich than the vision of even the most far-sighted statesman. The ‘three phases’ outlined above are valid and correct in their broad main outline; they have been and are being borne out all over Africa, by the course of present-day history. But our phases interact and merge with one another; there is no hard-and-fast dividing line to be drawn between them. And the tempo of events, the impetuous revolutionary spirit of the masses, so long repressed, is fast making every paper ‘time-table’ out of date.” (p9)

On the occasion of the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the OAU the journal carried an in-depth, insightful and thought-provoking article by Molefe Mini. The author analyses a number of countries which had suffered serious reversals in their revolutionary process. Pertinent perhaps for the debates in our country on the relationship between business and political figures, as well as corruption, is the quote of that great Egyptian and African revolutionary Abdul Gamal Nasser. Addressing a May

Day speech in 1966, Nasser, posed the question “The man who gathers a million pounds, two, three, ten or twenty million, how did he get all this money?” The answer “It is either through theft or through exploitation. By theft I mean commission. He builds a block of flats and gets commission; he concludes a transaction and takes a commission...”

“The second, this is taking the result of the sweat of the people, the workers. He pays one quarter of a pound to a worker who deserves one pound, thus taking the three quarters of the pound for himself. This is what we meant when we referred to the exploitation of the worker. Hence the process is one involving a theft and exploitation. We saw this taking place in our society when we used to be a feudalist and capitalist society. Today we are witnessing a socialist transformation in our society, where all means of production are in the hands of the working people.”

Molefi places the working class, even in its incoherent state, together with the peasants, at the very core of the national democratic revolution. He calls for a strategic worker-peasant alliance.

Given the growth and influence of revolutionary democratic parties in a number of African countries a conundrum arose. Is there a need for a Marxist-Leninist Party? And if it does exist what should be its attitude and relationship with those revolutionary democratic forces that had won state power?

The author is clear that there is a need for the “independent existence of the vanguard proletarian party.” In elaborating this point he says: “Africa’s Marxist-Leninists are faced with the vital task of helping to form and strengthen the genuinely progressive forces throughout the continent. The propagation of communist ideas, not only to one’s own

working people but also to the African working people as a whole, remains an important task. This journal, now in its 15<sup>th</sup> year of continuous publication, has become a truly African weapon of struggle for progress and genuine liberation.”

“Africa is entering a period of sharpening internal conflicts, of struggles to defend and consolidate revolutionary gains in those countries which have chosen the path of progress and for the victory of this path in those countries which are still gripped in the tight hold of imperialist domination.”(p49-50)

To mark the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the OAU, A Ngungunyane points out that the OAU contains two contradictory historic tendencies, one progressive and the other reactionary (No 94). It was this division that contributed to the aborted summit of 1982. A year later the two tendencies confronted each other at the 19<sup>th</sup> summit of the OAU. At that summit with Nigeria playing a leading role, MPLA was recognised as the legitimate government of Angola. That decision had a profound and positive impact upon the struggle in Namibia and our country.

The article contains a brief but trenchant criticism of reactionary conservative regimes in Zaire, Egypt, Ivory Coast, Gabon, Kenya, Morocco and Sudan. Ngungunyane concludes the article thus “The struggle includes an effort to maintain the OAU as an alliance of forces for the decolonisation of the continent, for the deepening and extension of the process of transformation in favour of the popular masses, and for the alignment of Africa on the side of the world movement that fights for an end to imperialist hegemony, for the genuine independence of the people, and for world peace. The unity of the forces fighting for these goals remains a prime task that faces the continent.”

“Time will tell whether, in its present form, the Organisation of African Unity is the appropriate organisational vehicle for the realisation of an all-African anti-imperialist unity.”

The same message calling for an anti imperialist, progressive, united and cohesive OAU was repeated in an article by Jabulani Mkhatswa, on the occasion of the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the OAU. (No 115) Echoing the words of the editorial in 1963, Jabulani writes: “Indeed Africa’s energies can best be concentrated if, and when, the Namibia and South African problem has been solved. With their natural wealth, a free Namibia and South Africa will make a tremendous contribution to the economic development of Africa as a whole” (p84).

South Africa and Namibia are now proud, free and independent. Fittingly the African Union (AU) was launched in Durban. Many of the issues, challenges and complexities of the African revolution which *The African Communist* dealt with are still with us today. It remains a central task of the revolutionary and progressive forces on our continent to take the lead in defending, promoting and enhancing the fight for national democracy, unity of the working class and peasantry, consistent and fearless anti-imperialist struggles and for the unity and cohesion of the Africa Union.

Hopefully sooner rather than later, a scholar, academic or research student will do a thorough analysis of the SACP and the AC’s theoretical, ideological, methodological and practical approach to the socio-political and socio-economic developments of our continent. The commitment, passion and all-round support for progressive change in Africa are an enduring and indispensable part of our revolutionary heritage, obligation and duty.

### The Soviet Union

For over 70 tumultuous years, the CPSA, the SACP and the AC remained steadfast, unwavering and totally committed to defending the Soviet Union and the other socialist countries. This attitude can be traced back to the 1917 October revolution in Russia which also led to the formation of the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) in July 1921.

Prior to that the International Socialist League (ISL) had appreciated the full force of that revolution on world developments. In an article well worth reading Z Nkosi writes about "How the Russian Revolution came to South Africa." In that article Nkosi quotes from the ISL Weekly *The International* of December 7, 1917 written, let us recall, from 8 000 miles away, with none of the modern means of communication that we take for granted. The article was forthright: "Our task in South Africa is a great one. We must educate the people in the principles of the Russian Revolution as we have never done before, by tens of thousands of leaflets. No comrade can stand today with arms akimbo, no branch should languish. It was a desertion of the cause. We have to prepare the workers against any attempt to mobilise them against their Russian comrades and in so preparing spread the flames of the most glorious and most peaceful revolution of all times." (No 70, 1977, p85)

This unapologetic acceptance of the Russian revolution laid the basis for the consistent, unyielding, some may say dogmatic, and unflinching support of the CPSA, SACP and the AC for the Soviet Union and the other socialist countries. Reading the AC one cannot but be moved by the strength of feeling, the deep emotional as well as the uncritical and unqualified support for the socialist world by South African communists. This view

and approach was to influence generations of freedom fighters in the ranks of the Congress Movement, trade unions and the SACP both in exile and at home.

When the Sino-Soviet split occurred, the SACP and the AC called for the unity in action of the world communist movement and unhesitatingly took the side of the Soviet Union. Indeed as the split widened and degenerated into aggressive rhetoric and vitriolic attacks, the SACP and the AC's criticism of Maoist China became more strident and hard hitting. Commenting on the events in China, the Central Committees of the SACP said in 1967 "In their external policy, the Chinese leaders have undermined and jeopardized the unity of the anti-imperialist front, of the Communist movement and of the socialist countries. Their factional and disruptive

activities in the trade union, national liberation, peace and many other international organisations, have diverted these movements from their tasks and impeded their progress. South African representatives at African, Afro-Asian and other solidarity and progressive meetings and conferences have time and again experienced the disruption, unprincipled manoeuvres and even racist appeals instigated by delegations from China."

"What causes the gravest concern is the mounting campaign of vilification directed against the leaders of other socialist countries and especially against the Communist Party and the Government of the Soviet Union." (No, 29, p15)

In 1968 the Soviet Union supported by other socialist countries entered the territory of Czechoslovakia. This intervention led to a cacophony of orchestrated anti-Soviet, anti-communist propaganda in the West, including apartheid South Africa. The response of the SACP and AC was

immediate, unqualified and unrelenting in support of the intervention. An editorial (No 36, p7) remarking on these momentous events noted: "it is our judgment that the action of the fraternal countries, in response to the call of those in Czechoslovakia most concerned with the preservation of the historic gains of socialism, was justified, timely and in a sense inevitable. Prior to the August events the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic (CSSR) was sliding rapidly towards chaos and anarchy; the forces of reaction, masking their true intentions behind 'socialist' and 'democratic', labels were more and more taking control and pushing the country toward the restoration of capitalism and desertion of the alliance of socialist countries. Unfortunately the Czechoslovakian Communist Party was in a state of internal disarray and confusion with its leaders unable – perhaps in some cases, unwilling – to organise and rally the healthy elements of the masses to fight reaction and assert the rule of the working class."

The ANC also came out in support of this intervention. Duma Nokwe, Secretary General of the ANC, said in a statement: "The Socialist countries are great supporters of the liberation struggle throughout the world and we are confident that their unity and joint might will remain unimpaired by recent events in Czechoslovakia" (ibid p97).

Readers will find in the AC articles, statements, assessments, interviews and analyses in full support of the great Vietnamese and Cuban revolutions.

The SACP and the AC never wavered in their deep commitment to the theory and practice of Proletarian Internationalism. In an article "What Proletarian Internationalism means to Africa" A Azad wrote: "Class consciousness of workers is exceptionally complex and includes phe-

nomena such as social-political, social psychological, ideological and ethical factors. Whatever the complexity, the highest form of working-class consciousness is the understanding of the common interests of the world-wide proletariat. Thus proletarian internationalism is the very core and heart of the relations between the component parts of the world communist movement, and the three basic revolutionary streams of our time – the world socialist system, national liberation movement and working class movements in the advanced capitalist countries." (No 70, 1977, p52)

The optimistic attitude to the social world was manifest in the thinking of the SACP even in early 1989. In the programme *The Path to Power*, adopted at its 7<sup>th</sup> Congress, the SACP declared: "World imperialism was dealt its first blow in 1917 – by the victory of the Great October Socialist Revolution in Russia. After the end of the Second World War and the defeat of German fascism and Japanese militarism, the world-wide historical process of social liberation was marked by the overthrow of exploiters in several countries in Europe and Asia and then Cuba. Socialism has turned into a world system, asserting itself on vast expanses of the earth. Socialist countries today represent a powerful international force. Some of them possess highly developed economies, a considerable scientific base, and a reliable military defence potential. World socialism accounts for more than one-third of the world's population in dozens of countries advancing along a path that reveals the intellectual and moral potential of humanity. A new way of life is taking shape in which there are neither oppressors nor the oppressed, neither exploiters nor the exploited, in which power belongs to the people." (No118, p79)

However by the end of that year the Berlin wall was to crash, the Soviet Union was on the brink of collapse, the world socialist system lay in ruins, and the world communist movement in disarray.

Joe Slovo in seeking some answers to this gruesome quandry wrote an illuminating pamphlet "Has Socialism Failed?" in which he attempted to unravel and analyse the fault lines and some of the fundamental weaknesses in the socialist system operating in the Soviet Union and the socialist countries in Europe.

The AC opened its columns to debate the views of its General Secretary. It was also a reflection of the divergent debates, differences and ideological fissures within the ranks of the SACP and the broader national liberation movement.

In a hard hitting critical response, Harry Gwala took Slovo to task. Gwala argued that one had to understand and appreciate the exceptionally difficult conditions and circumstances of the birth, growth, development and role of the Soviet Union. He also took Slovo to task for calling for the removal of the concept of "Dictatorship of the Proletariat" in Marxist-Leninist lexicon and his interpretation of Marxism-Leninism.

To quote Gwala: "The saying that the term 'dictatorship of the proletariat' has been abused and therefore we must shy away from it sends shivers down our spine. Without accusing comrade J.S. of re-writing Marxism-Leninism, we have seen how not so very long ago many parties of Western Europe, after the end of the Second World War, had high expectations about their path to socialism, but when this was blocked by what Lenin aptly calls the international connections of capitalism, these parties embarked on revisionism. They talked of 'structural reforms' where through the ballot box they would

restructure everything until we had socialism. They talked of socialism with a human face. Some of them shied away from the clenched fist and resorted to an open hand."

"Can we talk of stability when the imperialists are ever destabilising the young socialist states. NATO, SEATO and other hostile blocks of encirclement were not created by the socialist countries but by the 'Great Uncle Sam' who may be a model of democracy and freedom for the bourgeoisie but not for the disenfranchised masses of the world. We cannot idealise freedom and democracy. The bourgeoisie only know freedom to make profit, and democracy means commodity exchange." (No 123, 1990, p47)

The optimism, the profound unremitting and unyielding belief in the justness of the cause that the march of socialism was unstoppable and the Soviet Union indestructible may, with hindsight, be interpreted as being over the top. However, it needs to be understood and appreciated that imperialism constituted a real and present danger to world peace and to the heroic struggles waged by progressive and revolutionary forces in Latin America, Asia, Europe and Africa.

No doubt there are historians, politicians of all stripes and colours, trade unionists, civil society activists, scholars and students who are and will be critical of the stand taken by the SACP and the AC on the Soviet Union and the world socialist system. Some of the criticism is valid in that there was a lack of open public engagement and debate on the theoretical and ideological divisions and differences within the world communist movement on attitudes to the Soviet Union and the other socialist countries as well as other issues within the world communist movement.

Those of us who had witnessed and experienced the fault lines, gaps and weaknesses in the socialist countries only expressed our views privately and in closed meetings of the SACP.

Likewise, the socialist countries, in fully supporting the struggle for national liberation, peace, democracy and social progress also refrained from public criticism of their friends and allies. It can be argued that, that approach was not helpful either to freedom fighters or the builders of socialism.

This area of our rich history needs further research, investigation and honest assessment and analysis. For it is an indispensable part of our revolutionary and political praxis. Nevertheless it must be emphasized, that whatever view one may take on the positions adopted by the

SACP and the A , it is indisputable that our struggle as well as that of many, many other countries and parties received intense, invaluable and vitally important and necessary political, ideological, moral and material assistance from the Soviet Union and the other socialist countries. Without that unstinting support, assistance and solidarity, including for the armed struggle, our oppression would have been prolonged and the struggle would have taken longer. Let us not in the coldness of hindsight and the cajoling of our opponents forget our true friends, allies and fellow combatants. ★

*Cde Pahad is a former Central Committee and Politburo member of the SACP and served on the Editorial Board of the AC*

**50 YEARS OF AC**

## ***The African Communist* after Rivonia: brief reflections**

AC gave us the tools of analysis and helped us clarify what needed to be done, says **Max Sisulu**

*This article is based on a brief interview with Cde Max Sisulu, ANC and MK veteran. The interview was not recorded, and Cde Sisulu was unable to proof-read it before it went to print, as he was extremely busy and had to leave the country on parliamentary work:*

**T**o appreciate the significance of *The African Communist* in the 60s, you have to take the broader political context into account, both domestically and globally. In terms of the international context, it was the period of the immediate aftermath of the overthrow of colonial regimes in Africa and elsewhere in the “Third World”, the consolidation of socialism, and the emergence of progressive social democratic regimes in the West. There was a certain excitement on the continent and among progressives globally and an air of expectation of better things to come. Paradoxically, in our country it was a period of lull and despondency. The liberation movement had been defeated, and many of us left the country and became isolated from our home-base. There was then, of course, no email system or cell-phones or the international radio and TV channels you have today.

The AC was very welcome in the context. It reflected the optimism and hope of the period for the consolidation and expansion of “Third World” revolution. But, for us, it was also a way of connecting us to events back home. It was an indispensable source of information and analysis of what was going on at home. We were young and passionate. We went out of the country to get military training, and expected that we would return shortly to continue waging the struggle to overthrow apartheid. But this was not to be. It became clear, over time that we would not be going home anytime soon.

In this context, the AC played an important role in keeping our spirits up. We read and analysed and debated articles in AC in many structures of the movement, including MK. AC was very popular in the MK camps, it was compulsory reading. It was a major source of our political education. *Sechaba* (the ANC journal) and other publications came later. I remember also that there was a special issue on the armed struggle and there were also many articles on the armed struggle in other issues over the years.

The AC was my first exposure to the movement’s material when I went into

exile. At that time, like elsewhere in the “Third World”, many ANC members were attracted to Marxism, and so the AC was of enormous interest to us. Many of us were interested in theoretical and strategic issues, and so were attracted to the AC. It told us about the term CST – Colonialism of a Special Type. We loved that term! AC helped us to develop a class content to the national democratic revolution. It was also the height of the Cold War – and AC helped us to understand the reasons, meaning and implications of this, and how it also impacted on our revolution.

Basically, AC gave us the tools of analysis, and helped us to clarify what was to be done. It made us understand the relationship between theory and practice. As Marx said, philosophers have only interpreted the world, but the point is to change it. Through AC we were able to better interpret the world and act on it. The AC also helped us to analyse the news better so that we were able to read between the lines and also understand the root causes of events and their wider significance.

The AC’s value was not just its coverage on our country, but also events on the continent and globally. There were articles written by activists of other struggles all over the world, providing first-hand accounts and analyses of events. It made us aware of the links between our struggle and other struggles elsewhere in the world, and we realised the importance of learning the lessons of other struggles. It also helped to develop a more internationalist consciousness among us. Struggles of others became ours and ours theirs. It was through AC that I became aware of

the importance of the Cuban revolution and the need to express international solidarity with it. It was through the AC too that progressives elsewhere were mobilised to support our struggle.

The AC had one major blind spot. There was no criticism of the Soviet Union and the other socialist countries. The AC was too biased in favour of the Soviet Union. But some of us stayed in the Soviet Union, and we could see what was happening there. Differences of opinion were suppressed. People were even denied basic information. I remember I heard through an international radio station that a certain general in the Soviet Union had died. The woman who used to be his cook was working in the building I stayed in – but she didn’t know he died until I told her. The AC was too biased in favour of the Soviet Union. But the AC also reflected the leadership of the SACP, which was very rigid. In fact, Joe Slovo asked some SACP members to monitor us. It was interesting that he finally came round to criticising the Soviet Union in his “Has Socialism failed?”, but surely he could see what was wrong in the Soviet Union before it collapsed?

The other weakness of AC was that it hardly mentioned gender issues. But despite these weaknesses it was a very valuable publication from which both Communists and non-Communists in the movement learned a lot. It has become a part of our history and our experience and our personal growth, and we cannot forget the role it played in our lives. ★

*Cde Sisulu is an ANC NEC and NWC member and an MK veteran.*

50 YEARS OF AC

## ***The African Communist* and the '76 generation**

In this Letter to the Editor, **Joel Netshitenzhe** acknowledges the debt owed to the AC for helping his generation 'understand what we were about'

**Dear Comrade Yunus,**

**I**t's an African team on African soil, to win this competition for the very first time," says the soccer commentator in the background as I start penning this note to you. Ghana has just won the FIFA Under-20 World Cup, beating Brazil on penalties.

In other words, your harassment has finally paid off. Deadline has arrived, and I find myself sitting deep into the night with nary any references material to speak of, trying to recollect my experiences of the *African Communist* since the late 1970s when our generation joined the liberation movement.

I'm quite certain that you will agree that this is all unfair. It's the short notice. It's the fact that the Party has not yet placed the editions of that period on its website. But it's also your very correct assumption that, once you made the request, you would be able systematically to break down the resistance. One would have to find time to make a modest contribution.

There is this allure of the *African Communist* which makes it difficult to resist a request of this kind. Its depth of analysis and the clarity with which it helped our impatient generation to understand what we were in fact about, has left an endur-

ing sense of indebtedness. In the strictest Leninist sense, it has historically served as an educator, an organiser and a propagandist for the cause of national liberation and socialism.

I wish later to debate whether those attributes have endured especially in the post-1994 period! But first things first.

As I try to commit my thoughts to paper, emotions flow freely. But then it feels all so "un-African-Communist". Perhaps better still; because in the course of attempts at cold and scientific analysis we tend to forget that revolutions are about ordinary emotions of ordinary human beings. These are of course influenced by a combination of things, including the station that individuals occupy in class society. But in the paths that are charted by and for revolutionaries, the combination of feelings that influence an outcome – what Engels referred to as a parallelogram of forces or an intersection of a multiplicity of wills – can at times be as potent as the material base.

Let me start off by revealing a little secret. Many in our generation held the AC in such high esteem that it took courage to even think of making a contribution. The articles were so well-reasoned, with such profound understanding of the social

forces at play that its pages were for many years for us no more than a treasure to marvel at; and we would often scramble for the few copies available in the centres where we stayed. There was, with good timing in the period of the revival of mass struggles, the series by Dialego about dialectical and historical materialism – systematic, simply-written and taking us step-by-step through the Marxist methodology of understanding social phenomena, with such apt South African real-time examples. And to boot, with nice phrases to memorise!

Our group's first contact with the AC was in Lesotho, where we transited after the Soweto uprising. Staying with Chris Hanani and others, there were old editions galore to study. And the arrival of the parcels of the AC and the ANC's own journal, *Sechaba*, were like a celebratory payday. We would get our copies and disperse to read them from first to last page, the scales in our eyes being cleared, layer by layer, by the history lessons, analyses of current developments, book reviews, reproductions of propaganda leaflets and so on.

We were fortunate to be there during the last quarter of 1976, at the same time as the first editions of both publications after the beginning of the students' uprising reached their distribution points. We had explained the uprising as we understood it to the leadership. We listened to their attempts at reasoned assessments with rapt attention, but also with some scepticism. The publications helped, though...

*Sechaba* had a great description of the events unfolding in Soweto and other parts of the country; an account of the role of ANC underground structures then being rebuilt; a rending description of the cruelty of the apartheid police; the need to build the underground and intensify inter-

national work; and so on...moving and mobilising.

But if there were a contrast, here is what stood out with the AC. The analysis was systematic with gripping background about the effect of the changing material conditions on the events that were then unfolding: the growth of the working class during the years of the economic boom and the revival of the militancy of black workers from around 1972 in KwaZulu-Natal and elsewhere. It explained the efforts of the regime at co-opting black people through attempts at creating a 'black middle class with a stake in the system to defend'. It firmly asserted the need to mobilise the power of the working class more solidly behind the uprising. In brief, it drew attention to the link between the realities of race and class.

Later in the camps, Jack Simons would take this trend of insightful analysis further. Why the sudden urge on the part of the white minority regime to impose Afrikaans as a language of instruction among the African majority? he mused. His tentative answer was simple but thought-provoking: as they consolidated their hold on to political power, the Afrikaners had also penetrated the citadels of economic power and were increasingly becoming a significant economic player compared to 'English capital'. And one expression of the self-assertion of this class from the majority within a white minority, Jack argued, would naturally be to try and impose its language as a medium of commercial intercourse.

I vulgarise somewhat; but it is this depth of creative thinking, seeking to identify the less-obvious and yet profoundly-relevant underpinnings of phenomena that made the AC stand out as revered asset among the MK June 16 detachment and others who came after us.

With this, my 'advantage' of not having re-read those editions, there are many issues that stand out as having impacted on our thinking and our discussions; ones that really remain etched in one's memory: the debate on the national question and the injunction in an article by a Frelimo contributor (*For the nation to live the tribe must die*) and the stinging ripostes that followed; the Central Committee statement after its 1978 meeting about the way forward after Soweto; the interview with Lucio Lara of Angola's MPLA about the joys and the sorrows of post-liberation politics; the analysis of how Kanu in Kenya split into factions (A) and (B) controlled by American and British interests respectively; the critique of Black Consciousness (*Biko: fallen among the liberals*); the analyses of what happened to Nkurumah and Lumumba; and the reviews of such books as *Armies and Politics* (Jack Woddis) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (Frantz Fanon)... In very few instances were issues posed as final answers – rather they were presented as views placed before readers for discussion and further reflection.

And, by the way, that tradition of tentative thoughts, synthesis of views, intense debates and sometimes even angry but civil exchanges, was the hallmark of discourse even in the senior councils of both the SACP and the ANC. In meetings where one was privileged to attend, such as the Politico-Military Council, one would observe debates that went late into the night on one issue or even one paragraph in a draft document among such personalities as Joe Slovo, Josiah Jele, Mac Maharaj, Ruth Mompoti, Thabo Mbeki, Florence Mophosho, Chris Hani, Moses Mabida, Joe Nkadimeng, Joe Nhlanhla, Jacob Zuma, Joe Modise and Ray Simons... without prefaces such as "as the Presi-

dent/General-Secretary said".

First with shock, and then exasperation, one would wonder what the purpose of it all was. But it would be in the summary of, for instance, OR Tambo at the end, and in the statement released thereafter integrating the ideas, that the richness of the dialectic of thesis, anti-thesis and synthesis would come out in bold relief. The final decisions would be water-tight, well-thought-out, balanced and a guide to action across the length and breadth of South Africa and the various corners of the globe where members and supporters were located.

If there were a riveting section of the AC that brought theoretical precepts to life more than any other, it was the "*Why I became a communist*" occasional column. Here, we could see and touch ourselves: in stories by ordinary human beings we could identify with, originating from the rural hinterlands and the urban sprawls, from working class and middle 'class' families, black and white, *plaas-jappie* and *clever* alike, finding home in a cause that championed egalitarianism.

Especially from the early 1980s, with some confidence and a little encouragement, articles started to flow in from the June 16 generation. Jabulani Khumalo ("Mzala"), January Masilela ("Che Ogara"), Dumisani Makhaye and James Ngculu ("Mthetheleli") are among those that can be identified.

It would be amiss, though not to mention a few names of those who wrote for other journals of the Alliance, for, with time, the depth of analysis in the AC infused other publications such as the MK journal, *Dawn* (Brian Hoga, Mandla Langa, Sphiwe Nyanda, Barry Gilder and Nkululo Njongwe), *Mayibuye* (Zinjiva Nkondo and Selby Msimang), the *Voice of Women* (Marion Sparg, Sanki Mthembi-

Mahanyele and Mavivi Myakayaka-Manzini)... not to mention the many debates in *Sechaba* and Sactu's *Workers Unity* by some of these and other cadres.

Personally I only developed the courage to write the first article for the AC many years after I had started working in the ANC's Department of Information and Publicity (DIP). One had this inhibition that one didn't have much that was profound enough to be worthy of a by-line in the AC. And with the first article, I still remember haranguing the comrade responsible for collecting our post in Lusaka why that quarter's edition seemed to have been delayed. And that edition, plus the original manuscript, still lies buried somewhere in the boxes of literature that I brought from Lusaka!

I was encouraged by Brian Bunting, the editor, during my lucky and, I suppose, chance occurrence when I was requested to accompany him and Sonia Bunting on holiday to the People's Republic of China in the mid-1980s. Besides drinking from the well of their wise reminiscences and observing their at times playful banter, I would chip in about our experiences at the Moscow Institute of Social Sciences (Party School) and the insights I had gathered doing research on a thesis about "*The crisis of the South African ruling class and the NDR*". Almost as an instruction, I was compelled a few months down the line to make a contribution on this very issue.

To be honest, the pride that one attached to what one considered a seminal work then, is today tempered by a tinge of awkwardness. Not because of any change of circumstance in the global and domestic environment; nor any modification of one's views about the fundamentals that make the ideal of a society without exploitation so appealing. The latter, I believe, will endure in any human being of

conscience – debates about the when and the how notwithstanding. It is more about how in writing for the AC then, some of us tried to be so excruciatingly scientific and so bookishly rigorous that sometimes the content lacked the flesh and blood of real life. But I suppose this applies to all who have taken the first steps into sociological quasi-journalistic writing.

And where are we now?

The AC has continued the tradition of generating debate about the most crucial issues of the day. Yet today its impact seems that much less, compared to the days when it was an underground journal. This irony, I believe, is a consequence of a number of factors, both objective and subjective. To cite but a few tentative observations:

Firstly, there are real issues about the changed global balance of forces and the actual definition of socialism and how it relates to the national democratic revolution that have not received sufficient treatment in debates. As the reach of the SACP became broader and its composition mass in character, the tendency at the theoretical level seems to have been towards becoming narrower: with prescripts and analyses that tend to exclude than include. Thus, instead of systematically building a front of left forces and broadening the SACP's appeal at the theoretical level, major treatises seem to focus more on "deviations" within the potential base that is the broad liberation movement. Further, the critique of "living socialism" that Joe Slovo initiated has not been taken much further in a comprehensive, sufficiently distinctive and positive articulation of the ultimate objective and how to get there.

Secondly, in the early years after 1994 there seemed to be a trend to view access to state power by the liberation movement with suspicion, positing as most progres-

sive a focus on extra-governmental activity and on a detached critique of the tentative first steps within government to consolidate power and launch programmes of transformation. This seems to have been followed by another phase – whether the party should directly contest for state power – and then, lately, a positioning within the ANC and the corridors of power in a manner that sometimes can be profoundly divisive. Is it possible to merge all these in splendid combination irrespective of where the most senior leadership is located?

Thirdly, the SACP and the liberation movement as a whole have not honed the skill of accurately assessing the balance of forces in changing environments – domestically and globally – and out of this, answering the question: what is the most critical task of the moment?

Fourthly, the left at times seems to revel in its own purity of thought and action; in the process forgetting that it should in theory and in practice be the leader of the nation as a whole, steering the most critical sectors in society towards a social compact of mutually-beneficial actions. In other words, the challenge is to take to heart the advice of Antonio Gramsci about hegemony through persuasion (and disciplined mass power), particularly in this phase of social transformation.

The fifth challenge is about the simple templates that the left tends to employ in explaining complex processes. Thus, unlike before, when the AC would be the first port of call for one to understand ‘epoch-

making’ global events, there is not much reference material generally within South Africa and even globally, for instance, on the character of the global economic crisis and its meaning both for the limits of the capitalist system and yet its seeming internal capacity for self-perpetuation.

I venture these tentative thoughts to generate further debate in the columns of the *African Communist*, as the journal enters the second half of what should turn into a century (and more) of its existence. The fundamental issue is that there is now no reason why its reach, its appeal and its impact should not be that much wider than in the past 50 years, 30 of which were under conditions of illegality!

And so I do hope that you have reaped what you sowed by inviting this missive.

It’s Saturday afternoon, and I now rest my case. Kaizer Chiefs and Mamelodi Sundowns have again flattered to deceive, and only Orlando Pirates and Supersport United can benefit from this.

Come 2010, and who knows, the soccer commentators may have to repeat the words they uttered in Egypt on that Friday evening of 15 October 2009: “It’s an African team on African soil, to win this competition for the very first time”!

Will it be Bafana Bafana? Hope springs eternal.

Good afternoon!

Yours sincerely,

**Joel Netshitenzhe**

*Cde Netshitenzhe is an ANC NEC member, former SACP member and an MK veteran*

50 YEARS OF AC

## Reflections on AC and the 80s generation

It was the one publication, recalls **Dipuo Mvelase**, that sent shivers down the spine of the apartheid regime

A source of inspiration and intellectual stimulation for many cadres of the Alliance – that for me is the rich life story of *The African Communist*, the main publication of the South African Communist Party

Given the mystical and almost larger-than-life image of this publication, who can blame me for feeling a little intimidated when I first lay my hands on the copy? There, for all to see, in my hands: the one publication that sent shivers down the spine of the apartheid oppressive system. How many had been incarcerated for daring to keep it in their possession? How many had been condemned for penning ideas that challenged the foundations of capitalism and white supremacy?

The overwhelming feeling I had for this august publication was soon replaced by inexplicable adoration for the role it played among the young and old within the liberation struggle. The AC soon became an indispensable tool for political education and growth.

After reading an article in one of its issues I was first exposed to in 1983, my relationship with the publication changed forever. Soon it became a must-read and an eternal fountain of relevant revolution-

ary thought.

The added significance of the first AC that I read was also that it was an issue celebrating the 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the SACP. It featured articles that reflected on the immeasurable contribution of communists in general and the SACP in particular in the national democratic struggle, the building of the ANC and Sactu. It was an account of the SACP's sterling role in the revolutionary Tripartite Alliance of the ANC, SACP and Sactu. An Alliance forged in struggle and sealed by the blood of all those who paid the ultimate price. The very mention of this Alliance sent shivers down the enemy spine. For once, the brutality of the apartheid machinery could not scare me, knowing that the revolutionary project was stronger than the apartheid repressive machinery.

The cover of this 1981 AC was yellow and featured the pictures of the President of the ANC Comrade Oliver Tambo and Cde Moses Mabhida, the General Secretary of the SACP.

It was not until in the camps that I really spent time reading and engaging in discussions on articles in the AC. As daunting as it was, it became a very important teacher and a resource that informed discussions for all the cadres – communist and non

communist. It not only provided critical analysis of the development of the struggle at home and abroad, but also sharpened our understanding of the struggles taking place in the world, their interconnection with and impact on the South African national liberation struggle. In this way, it also sharpened our understanding of how our own struggle fitted in with other struggles fought by the oppressed the world over. Through it we understood how the system of capitalism combined with racism to subject millions of working class people to a life of misery and permanent exploitation.

I was part of the group that joined the ANC in the 1980s. This generation, like the one of the 1970s, was militant and impatient and wanted an immediate retaliation against apartheid's brutality. The armed struggle, we thought, needed to be intensified and we saw little value in the theoretical debates.

It was when only I read the AC and other publications, engaged in discussions, and attended political education classes that I understood and appreciated the value of theoretical clarity, even for the most militant political action. It was through the AC and continuous discussions of its issues that I and many of my fellow comrades learned that true militancy comes from the right balance of both theory and action; that it is theory that informs political action and determines its success or otherwise.

Having grasped the role of capitalism in the repression of working class people, I was inspired by what the SACP stood for, its principles and values. I understood why it was an ally of the people's movement – the ANC. It was clear why the best of our revolution, the advanced cadres were in its ranks. It was its engagement with the theoretical basis of political action that had

formed the basis for the most militant of even the ANC's political engagement with oppression. I aspired to be part of this advanced detachment of the South African revolution, and so did many others in the camp. Reflecting on the clarity of thought and immense knowledge and insight of those who contributed to the AC, one was overwhelmed at the prospect of engaging with those members of the SACP that had made a tremendous contribution to the thinking behind our national democratic revolution.

The libraries in the various facilities where we stayed were always packed with old copies which one tried to read to catch up while impatiently waiting for the new copies that we all took turns reading and engaging in discussions on. The rush of also trying to read everything was also as a result of our ever-burning desire to return to our own battleground at home. One was always aware that the exposure and access to these publications was a rare privilege and so the need to take full advantage of such an opportunity cannot be overstated. It was also critical that one was always in combat readiness, in all respects, to confront the demons of apartheid head-on.

It is understandable, now thinking about it, why the regime thought all ANC cadres are communists. Even though in those days the identity of communists was a secret – the force of their ideological influence through publications such as the AC was unbelievable.

The contribution of *the African Communist* in building cadres and leaders for the South African revolution must be celebrated by all South Africans. The legacy of *the African Communist* belongs to all of us and it must be shared, enriched and preserved for future generations. Post liberation politics is more complex and requires more theoretical clarity. One cannot

overemphasise the need for more analysis of the current political conjecture. It is the AC, through a careful analysis of nature of our political settlement and conditions in our country and within our movement that holds the key to unlocking the unique theoretical challenges of our time and the

mediation of inevitable tensions that come with the challenges of governance and proximity to state power. ★

*Cde Mvelase is an SACP Central Committee and Politburo member and MK veteran.*

## 50 YEARS OF AC

## The AC and the youth

It has been an extra cadre we needed in the struggle against social injustice and inequality, says **Buti Manamela**

Celebrating the 50th anniversary of the *African Communist* is almost equal to celebrating the history of our country. Launched nine years after the banning of the South African Communist Party (SACP) and six years after its re-establishment underground, the AC became a courier of information from some of the best minds and leadership of the SACP into the factory floors, prison cells, universities, townships, Umkhonto we Sizwe military camps and broadly on the continent too. It became the ideological mouthpiece of a Communist Party and a class that was determined to arm the people of our country with the best political ammunition to defeat the venom of colonialism and apartheid.

Scanning through the many editions released since the first little black book fifty years ago exposes a variety of contributors who in most instances did not hold blanket tactical approaches to the struggle. Many of the articles remain an abundant resource and a window into the history and intellectual prowess of our Party, especially for the youth of our country who are eager to research into the history of our country or probe the different ideological

lineages and thousand thoughts in our movement.

The scan also reveals the different epochs of our struggle and the response of the SACP Central Committee at each time, together with the different interpretations of various cadres throughout the world on such approaches. They open a world of how a Communist Party that was faced with an ugly system of apartheid at home, contributed intellectually and in practical terms to the struggles of the people of the world and sought to learn from their different struggles.

Intellectual voices from all over the globe shared their thoughts on changing the world through this journal. They debated different approaches and presented fresh analysis on the struggle for socialism. The journal remains a succinct source of information for young Reds to devour as sustenance to continue with the struggle for socialism.

So, the AC is like a \$100 bill that has left the editorial rooms of the SACP and travelled the world, literally and figuratively, to analyse the banning of the ANC and other political formations, the launch of MK, the Treason Trial, Morogoro Conference, the various extended Central Committee meetings, the 1976 uprisings,

the launch of Azaso and Cosas, the launch of the UDF, the state of emergency, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the release of Nelson Mandela, the assassination of our beloved Chris Hani, the first democratic elections, the re-launch of the YCLSA, Polokwane and now it is ready to navigate us into a socialist future.

But most interestingly for us as the youth, who were exposed to the AC in the transitional years of the early 90s, it became the fly that sat on the wall of Central Committee and alliance meetings – and delivered on the internal ideological wars on the sunset clause, whether the SACP should be vanguard or mass-based, the privatisation of state assets debate, the Gear exchange and many other intellectually rich engagements that helped us distinguish the pros from the cons. In the student and youth movement we used to cherish burying our heads into the Nzimande and Gwala vs Cronin and Slovo debate on whether the SACP should be an “amorphous mass” or a “vanguard”. There was joy in reading and revisiting Pallo vs Slovo debate on the sunset clause. We loved the way Cronin shut down Mokaba (or was it Mokaba?) after a 2000 Alliance meeting on Gear and its priorities. Even the young got their bites, such as when David Mazono and Oupa Bodibe (in different articles) showed Jabu Moleketu and Josia Jele who has more energy. We saw the AC as the battleground for which the left allowed those with whom they disagreed a voice in order to give them an ideological punch and bleed their neo-liberal noses; or feast on the rich platter of various and genuine Marxist approaches to different subjects. The beauty of the AC of our time is that we could quote and unquote to disarm our ideological foes, and they could also do the same, but with no fear of arrest or torture.

### **The AC as an organiser’s toolbox**

The AC was not a mere stage for the ideologically advanced to show their dexterity, but served as the best organiser’s toolbox for young communists throughout the country. This was especially more so when the party engulfed itself into campaign mode during the term of Chris Hani as General Secretary to date. The AC became the platform for the Central Committee to engage its structures on the campaigns and their values, and their ideological significance. Importantly, this showed the ability of the AC to change with the times and address the most pertinent of issues. Its ability to travel through the country meant that it could still courier, as usual, the message from the CC on its decisions and rationale from the campaigns that were undertaken and arm the branches so they are able to take forward the campaigns.

But the AC was also not only about campaigns, it was also about political education. In fact, most of us devoured the AC because it was the best available and accessible political tool. In the early 90’s the AC contained a series of political education articles on various topics, political economy, dialectical and historical materialism, history of the national liberation movement and many more. In fact, the first ever AC I laid my eyes on (in 1996, and hopefully I will still get that copy) focused on political economy. It was incisive and helped open a world otherwise too complex to understand. Yet it was presented in the AC in the simplest fashion.

Since as far as I could remember, some of the most interesting debates in the AC were on the Alliance. Whether it was on the privatisation debate, or on the armed struggle, or on economic policy, or on Gear, the AC held the entire alliance and yet

provided different perspectives on those issues. This helped, especially young communists, to get to understand and better explain some of the issues and trivialities that were confronting our movement at the time. This was an important source of information that party organisers needed to deal with the anti-communist tendency that has been there in the movement for some time. But for us, the future members and leaders of the Party, it also helps us to mark the different spots on this route towards socialism. It helps us to keep memory of the different manoeuvres applied in the battle of ideas, especially within the alliance. It teaches us perseverance, that as we struggle for socialism in our lifetime, sometimes our greatest enemies hide within our trusted allies. But importantly, most of the ideological debates in the AC about the Alliance thought every SACP organiser and every YCLer that until we attain the strategic objective of the National Democratic Revolution, we have to defend the Alliance, and that walking out is not the best of solutions. This is important because it shows the ability of the AC not only to be about the historical or current affairs, but also about the socialist future.

But the most organising ability of the AC for us, although less significant for others, was on the re-launch of the YCL. One of the first debates on whether there was a need for the re-establishment of the YCL or not appeared in the AC between Sizwe Shezi and Lucky Montana. This was an important debate, and one of the titles of one of the articles, "Socialism for Youth and Youth for Socialism", remains the organising slogan for the YCL. Although the decision to re-establish the YCL did not only rely on the articles as published, both of them played an important role in helping us determine

what we should concentrate on and what we should avoid in the course of building a strong and vibrant youth formation.

Other than that, Brian Bunting's "Why and How the YCL was Formed?" remains an important authority on the history and role of the League. It opened up a new world of information which served as an inspiration on what the YCL should currently focus on.

The AC has also been an important source of cultural activism. Who can forget the many poetic contributions by Ben Dikobe Martin's parting shot, "how can corn expect justice from a courtroom full of chicken" and many other contributors to the poetic world of the AC. This incisive section opened up a new world for many young communists, and showed that there are other ways to express political satire and poke holes in the apartheid system even when you do not have a gun. The black ink that remains on the poetic pages of the AC continues to inspire many young communists to explore arts and culture as a way of the struggle for socialism, and not a break into Hollywood.

As we celebrate the AC, we are humbled by the fact that this was not just an ideological mouthpiece of the SACP, but an extra cadre we needed in the struggle against social injustice and inequality. It was that extra cadre that is there when we need to communicate amongst ourselves. The responsibility lies with the young reds to maintain this publication, continue to breathe life into it, to share ideas and to ensure that through it, we give hope to the millions of workers that socialism is the future. ★

*Cde Manamela is the National Secretary of the Young Communist League and serves on the AC Editorial Board*

## 50 YEARS OF AC

## AC must rise to the challenge

With socialist ideas in decline and xenophobic politics and rampant self-enrichment on the increase, the journal faces new challenges, writes **Ari Sitas**

I saw my first real copy of AC in Botswana during the Gabarone Festival of Resistance Culture in 1982. By this I mean a real copy with cover, contents page and content (not photostated pages, false covers and frayed edges as was the custom through most of the 70s.) I saw the first batch of real copies distributed in a political seminar for COSATU shop-stewards in 1986. It had been de facto unbanned since then.

I am of the 1970s generation – a generation that cut its teeth at a key point of resistance against the apartheid state. Yet as 20-year-olds in Johannesburg we were primarily nurtured through word of mouth, oral and performative currents to be on some kind of left. Scholarship and reading came later. It increased exponentially after Soweto 1976.

It was the time of radical theatre and given the dominance of the Black Consciousness movement, tons of defiant oral poetry. But then again, unless you knew people who were of the previous generation you could have thought that everything had started with Biko versus Nusas. And for its part, Nusas was pulling in two contrary directions: one of white Africanism in response to the Black Consciousness movement and one towards

assisting with the organisation of trade unions through the Industrial Aid Society. The first batch of Robben Island comrades were only beginning to come out as new swathes were rushed back in the context of a growing insurrection.

Most political education occurred in non-university contexts and here although past networks were subdued – networks of the Transvaal Indian Congress or of the Congress of Democrats and, particularly in Alex or the East Rand, of the ANC enjoyed some currency. Political education was therefore about talking and arguing well into the night and very few people committed their ideas to paper for obvious reasons. But reading we did, and the more banned or illegal the text was, the better. There was a lot to read despite the tightening of censorship and control as the 1970s unfolded.

Reading was of course of two types: the “outside” and clandestine texts and the locally produced ones. The former carried with them some indelible prestige but you could not show off with them, you could not keep them on the shelf. They had to be passed on or be disposed of. The most easily available was Sechaba and close second was always the AC. We did read Marx and the classics of socialism; Fanon,

Cesaire, Nkrumah, Mao and other Third World revolutionaries in any possible form but there was something special in the allure of a Communist journal in and on Africa.

AC in particular would arrive already photostated via Botswana. It came to us via a Wits librarian whose mother had a homestead there who would use the machine in the basement of the Old Cullen Library to make further copies – never more than 6-7. It depended on the order for shotostats for journal articles. It would always be on an A-4 page sideways so there would always be two pages on a page. He could not inflate the number of pages too much. Official access to banned material was possible through a signature or two from relevant lecturers – they were a handful who might have been sympathetic (I was blessed to have Eddie and David Webster as my task masters) but from what I recall neither Sechaba nor AC were available through the library. Jenny Curtis, by then banned and a librarian at the Institute of Race Relations in Braamfontein, would also give access to some clandestine material she had ordered but the stock was varied and irregular.

By the mid-1970s there was a growing volume of locally produced periodicals and journals responding to a variety of local impulses. After the Durban strikes you would be nobody if you were without the latest *South African Labour Bulletin* and you would know verbatim the ‘case’ for African trade unionism. It was quite a thrill to be reading of the escalating militancy of black workers everywhere in the country. After 1976, you were nobody if you were without the *Staffrider* magazine and its enticing content – produced by vibrant groups everywhere – Alex, Mpumalanga and Soweto. There was also *Black Review* and the *Saso Newsletter* and dozens of

trade union-linked newspapers. Soon enough *Africa Perspective* and *Work in Progress* were launched in Johannesburg and also became household journals for a growing white and black left intelligentsia. It was also a sign of honour to be remembered by the Cape crowd who were producing *Social Review*.

By the 1980s as the insurrection spread, publications were at their premium: *Speak*, *Agenda*, *Saspu National*, the Cosaw-linked journals like *Writers Notebook* in Natal and most importantly *Injula* that was being produced in isiZulu and taking head on the ethnicity and culture debate by the *Culture and Working Life Project* in Durban. This got me into trouble with Zulu Nationalists, unbeknown to them that the real trouble-makers were Blade Nzimande, Sbu Ndebele, Nise Malange and so on.

The AC was and continued to be of great importance because it was the only analytical journal that made us understand issues that were not possible to deal with on an everyday basis. Some names I recall were Sol Dabula, Mzala (very important for the Natal tragedy), ANC Khumalo, Ahmed Azad, Maxwell and Sisa Majola. But I assumed wrongly that each one involved more than an author and therefore authorship was secondary – of primary concern were the issues.

For example: what were the implications of the Morogoro Conference and its slogan of the African working-class leading the national democratic revolution? What were the implications of the internal colonialism thesis? What was going on in broader liberation struggles and in particular the ones in our immediate neighbourhood: Frelimo, MPLA, Zapu and Zanu? What was the civil war about? Who were the FNLA, Unita and Renamo? What were the challenges and limitations of the Black Consciousness Movement and

the growing trade union movement? Later, what of Zulu ethnicity and the civil war in Natal?

I am privileged now to be teaching the 90s generation in a democratic society – and I am teaching a generation of post-apartheid students in rapidly changing universities in a rapidly globalising world. Most intellectual work is within contexts where Marxist or socialist ideas are in

decline and where identity and xenophobic politics and rampant self-enrichment are on the increase and are celebrated. The challenges are different but as profound. It is expected of 50-year-olds to rise to them. ★

*Cde Sitas is a sociology professor and an academic and cultural activist serving on the Board of the Chris Hani Institute*

## 50 YEARS OF AC

## Belling the cat: *The African Communist* in the early 1990s

After 30 years of illegality, AC moved quickly and assertively to centre-stage in the intense debates of the early 1990s, writes **Jeremy Cronin**

At the beginning of 1991, after years of being edited in London and printed in the former German Democratic Republic, the editorial and production work of *The African Communist* finally returned home. This return was launched with the 1st Quarter 1991 issue featuring a lively red and black cover and a photo from a recent mass rally. The photo features a sea of heads and clenched fists. The focal point is a young boy who is possibly 12 or 13 years old. He is wearing a white ANC T-shirt and a make-shift bandana with an SACP hammer, sickle and star.

I remember the long debate in downtown Johannesburg that we had as the AC editorial and production team about every detail of this first “proudly South African” issue after some three decades of enforced editorial exile. Someone said that the colours of the proposed cover, red and black (with a dash of white), were those

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*To bell the cat: to hang a bell round the cat's neck, to be warned of its approach, as the mice proposed in the fable, and esp. to undertake the perilous part in any movement, The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*

used by the Nazi party! That had us stumped for a brief moment. Someone else said, “well at least they knew something about visual impact” – but that wasn’t reassuring. Then a third comrade said this was South Africa, not Germany, and here black and red had an altogether different symbolic significance. Since, in any case, we all liked the proposed cover (designed by David Niddrie and Chris Vick), we nodded in wise agreement.

Beneath the photo, was a bold “VIVA SOCIALISM!” and below that in smaller lettering was “Learning from the crisis”. These two statements summed up much about the challenging and paradoxical reality in which the SACP found itself in the early 1990s. The “crisis” in 1991 referred, of course, not to Wall Street, but to Eastern Europe. The Berlin Wall had collapsed, the Soviet Union was imploding, many Communist Parties in other parts of the world had changed their names, or had fragmented, or quietly disappeared. Yet, here in South Africa, emerging from four decades of illegality and deeply embedded within a decade-and-a-half of rolling, semi-insurrectionary mass struggle, the SACP enjoyed unprecedented popularity. The cover of this 1st Quarter 1991 issue was deliberately chosen to project an image of

a party and a cause rooted in a proud legacy. The logo and masthead were familiar from many previous issues. This was not AC issue number 1, after all. It was number 124. We had a history. But, as the cover photo tried to suggest, we were also dynamic and youthful. We had a future.

Re-reading my early 1990s copies of the AC, I am struck by many matters. Some things I had forgotten. I had not remembered, for instance, how early on it was that the SACP began to advance the slogan “Socialism is the Future...Build it Now!”. (That’s the wording splashed across the cover of the 3rd Quarter 1993 issue.) In the light of current policy commitments of the ANC-led government, it is interesting to find in the 3rd Quarter 1991 issue Cara Jeppe (then with Nehawu and an SACP member) writing an article on “Why national health insurance is not enough” – she calls for a “full National Health Service” and not just an NHI, on the grounds that the latter will not transform (it might prop up) privatised health-care.

There are also early interventions into matters that we are now only belatedly (and possibly still inadequately) taking up as a broad movement. The very first issue in 1991, for instance, has a book review on environmental sustainability (entitled “The green revolutionaries”), and the 4th Quarter issue of 1991 has a brief intervention on a similar theme (“Green communists?” by a collective signing itself “the Stellenbosch comrades”). The 3<sup>rd</sup> Quarter 1991 issue features a bearded Karl Marx on its cover and a question: “Marxism and Feminism – are they uneasy bedfellows?” That issue has two important articles on the challenges of patriarchy, feminism and organising women by Pat Horn and Jenny Schreiner.

The early 1990s issues of the AC also provide us with some of the few relatively

extensive documented insights into what Chris Hani was thinking and saying in the last years of his life. Hani was an activist, a passionate speaker – but he seldom sat down to write articles. Some of his last speeches are published in these ACs of the early 1990s. Of particular value is the extensive interview that the AC conducted with Hani as the newly elected SACP general secretary in the 1st Quarter issue of 1992 (“Interview with Chris Hani. The new general secretary speaks on the future of the Party”). Among other things, Hani criticises an elitist attitude towards the ANC in certain SACP circles: “That tendency is growing. I’ve heard reports that, in some areas people would rather join the Party than the ANC. But I think Party elitism is a dangerous tendency and I believe the Party must step in to stop it...Although our constitution doesn’t say you should become a member of the ANC before you become a member of the Party...we must show the political correctness of our comrades joining the ANC and being part of finding a solution to any problems within the ANC...I think the SACP would never accept a position where communists tend to seek refuge in the Party whenever there are problems in the ANC, instead of going into the ANC and, in a democratic way, trying to solve these problems.”

Hani is characteristically frank in his assessment of some of the weaknesses of MK in exile. Asked about the former Soviet Union, he is also forthright in both his praise (for its role in defeating fascism, and for its support to liberation struggles) and in his criticism: “there were a number of serious violations, both political and economic. Politically, because there was a violation of democracy and an arrogation of power and control by the Communist Party. The Party became the only political and economic organ in society. All organs

of civil society were not functioning effectively. . .”

These latter views are important because there have sometimes been attempts to suggest there were differences between Hani and Slovo in regard to the latter’s critique of anti-democratic tendencies in the Soviet experience.

There were, of course, many matters taken up in the AC through the 1990s, but there are certain central themes that recur. Emerging from four decades of illegality, there was the pressing question of “What kind of Party should we be building?” Throughout the early 1990s there were sharp debates and differences on this matter. The “What kind of party?” question was also inevitably linked to two other vexed challenges – “What kind of socialism are we striving for?” and “What kind of strategy is needed to achieve this objective?”. And then there was, of course, the issue that Lenin advises should always be at the heart of any communist analysis and strategy – the question of state power.

In what follows, I would like to track these issues as they were presented and debated in the AC from 1991 to the 1994 democratic breakthrough.

#### **What kind of Party?**

At the time of its unbanning in February 1990, SACP membership had grown steadily to a few thousand. The majority of members were in exile, most of them in MK camps and in “forward areas” in neighbouring states. There were also a few hundred underground members in clandestine units within SA. Whether in exile or in the underground, Party membership was secret, only the Party’s general secretary and chairperson’s names were announced publicly. Even comrades serving in the same unit would not necessarily have known each other’s real names.

Membership was obtained through “invitation”, that is, through targeted recruitment after a proposed name had been screened (as best as possible in often difficult circumstances). Candidate members served a probationary period before being admitted to full membership. Typically, only one member of a unit would have knowledge of, and communication with a higher structure.

These methods of clandestine Party organisation (which were practised successfully even inside apartheid jails) were, of course, forced upon the SACP through the bitter experience of forty years of persecution and illegality. They proved invaluable in helping the Party to survive, to grow, and to play an increasingly influential role through this complicated period. However, this approach to Party organisation was not without its dangers. It could lead to a certain Party elitism (which, as we have already noted, Hani was raising as a concern in the different context of a post-1990 reality). The potential dangers of elitism were enhanced in the period of exile by the fact that opportunities for advanced studies in a variety of areas – ideological work, engineering, military science, intelligence, etc. – were largely offered to movement cadres by the Soviet Union and other socialist countries. Many non-communists benefited from these opportunities, but it is possible that SACP membership might have been an added advantage when it came to selection. This was certainly a perception I encountered among ANC comrades in exile in the late 1980s. I have also heard allegations that in some places good comrades who tried to join the Party were deliberately excluded in the vetting process for various personal or other petty gate-keeping reasons.

Inside South Africa, the rolling waves of semi-insurrectionary struggle through the

mid-1970s and for the entire 1980s produced tens of thousands of seasoned revolutionary activists, many of whom identified closely with the SACP. Many wanted to join the Party but could not access it because of its underground nature.

To complicate matters further, around half of the central committee members elected in the 7<sup>th</sup> SACP Congress in Cuba in April 1989 quietly resigned from the Party in early 1990. Some felt that the SACP had “outlived its usefulness”, others felt that it would be problematic to unveil too many senior ANC leaders as communists, and since Party membership would no longer be a secret matter they believed they had “no other option”. So, while on the one hand the SACP had a large queue of aspirant members eager to join, we also had a trickle (but a senior leadership trickle) of resignations.

It was in this context that, in the early 1990s, there was an intense debate around what kind of Party we should be building in the new South African (and global) reality. The debate heated up as we approached our first home-based “re-launch” 8<sup>th</sup> Congress, held in Johannesburg in December 1991. Cde Harry Gwala, reacting to what he considered to be “reformist” theses in the draft constitution and policy documents for the Congress, kicked off the debate in his inimitable style. “A party of the working class, or an amorphous mess?” was the polemical title of his article in the 4<sup>th</sup> Quarter 1991 AC. This topic was, in fact, the central feature of this issue of the AC, which had a cover posing the question: “Mass party or vanguard? Does it have to be one without the other...?”

Comrade Gwala appeared to have few doubts: “Here there can be no compromise – either a vanguard party or just another labour party or social democratic

party”. Evoking Lenin and Leninist critiques of various reformist currents, Gwala writes: “We find the same reasoning in our own modern South African Marxists. From 1976 there was a revolutionary upswing in the people’s struggle for liberation. The revolutionary youth was attracted to Marxism. Marxism-Leninism became the fashion. Unfortunately this revolutionary zeal was not matched by revolutionary theory. Most of these people were weak in theory and inexperienced in political organisation and therefore had only a vague, and for the most part incorrect, idea of Marxism...With mass participation in the struggle and the working class embarking ever more on militant action, our Marxists were even attracted by the language of some of these people and began to talk of democratic socialism and abandoned scientific socialism. In a great stampede from the so-called ‘personality cult’ and bureaucratic practices they began to advocate a mass party which allowed everyone in.”

In the same issue of the AC, I replied to Gwala under an equally polemical title – “Lenin is not a statue”. I also had recourse to Lenin, quoting, amongst other things, from Lenin’s November 1905 pamphlet, *The re-organisation of the Party*: “Our Party [Lenin wrote] has stagnated while working underground...it has been suffocating underground during the last few years. The ‘underground’ is breaking up. Forward, then, more boldly...rally all the worker Social Democrats round yourselves, incorporate them in the ranks of the Party organisations by hundreds and thousands. Let their delegates put new life into the ranks of our central bodies, let the fresh spirit of young revolutionary Russia pour in through them...the new form of the basic organisational nucleus of the workers’ party, must be definitely much

broadly than were the old circles. Apart from this, the new nucleus will most likely have to be a less rigid, more 'free' more 'loose' organisation. With complete freedom of association and civil liberties for the people..."

In quoting from Lenin's 1905 pamphlet, I was all too aware that at other times Lenin had argued just like Gwala for a tight and highly disciplined Party structure (notably in *What is to be done?*, 1902). This is why I chose the title "Lenin is not a statue" for my intervention – trying to set Lenin into a timeless bronze caste, I argued, simply doesn't do service to the dynamic nature of his politics and theory as he engaged with shifting realities.

This debate rumbled on in subsequent issues of the AC, and included an important intervention by Skenjana Roji, "Disregarding the lessons of history" (1st Quarter, 1992), in which he, too, took issue with much of what Harry Gwala was saying. Roji emphasised Lenin's later writings in which he warned against creeping bureaucratisation within the post-1917 Russian Communist Party.

Looking back on this debate, I suspect that at least some of the differences related to different subjective histories. When Gwala evokes a 1976 generation of militant youth whose "revolutionary zeal was not matched by revolutionary theory", he is almost certainly thinking about the flood of new inmates pouring into Robben Island and then benefiting from patient years of brilliant, prison political education under the direction of older inmates like Govan Mbeki and Gwala himself. When Roji evokes the dangers of inner-Party gate-keeping and bureaucratisation he is speaking out of an ANC/SACP exile experience, and, indeed, out of a direct experience of Soviet socialism in its declining years.

But lurking in the background of this

whole debate in the early 1990s was a still unnamed elephant in the room – what we were to call some 10 years later "the 1996 class project". Gwala certainly believed that he was defending the SACP's scientific socialist traditions against a dangerous reformist tendency that was steam-rolling the Party into liquidation. In reading between the lines of his intervention (with its critique of those who were trying to introduce formulations like "democratic socialism"), it is obvious that the principal target of his polemic was Joe Slovo, the SACP's general secretary at the time.

However, whatever the rights and wrongs of Slovo's role in the SACP, the real threat and the real liquidationists were located elsewhere. They included some of the former senior SACP leaders who had left the Party in 1990, and some who maintained close ties with these but who remained for a time within the Party. Unlike Gwala, they never deigned to enter the 1991 AC debate on what kind of party we should be building. But, ironically, they agreed with Gwala, although for very different reasons, that the Party should be a "tight" "vanguard" organisation, with limited membership and with screening and probation. Of course, they imagined that it would be *they* who would conduct the screening and probation – after all they were (and they mostly were) graduates from the Moscow Party School. All of this was to emerge much more fully later with, for instance, the anti-SACP 2002 pamphlet by Jabu Moleketi and Josiah Jele, *Two strategies of the national liberation movement in the struggle for the victory of the national democratic revolution*. For those who were later to emerge as the "1996 class project", the SACP's move towards being a "mass party" in the early 1990s was seen as a threat to their agenda. They envisaged the national democratic revolution as es-

essentially the de-racialisation of capitalism. They hoped to park a tiny SACP, well-marshalled by gate-keepers, on the sidelines, awaiting some distant socialist “second stage”, while the national democratic revolution was left to the hegemony of an emergent “patriotic” bourgeoisie.

In 1991 the debate around what kind of Party we should be building was provisionally resolved at our 8<sup>th</sup> National Congress in December that year. It was agreed that the Party should be both a vanguard and a mass party. “Vanguard” described the socialist *role* of the Party in the midst of the NDR. “Mass” described the *character*, the relative size, that the Party should seek to have in the post-1990 conjuncture. The question of developing our cadreship was considered to be best handled *within* the Party through exposing tens of thousands of new recruits to Party political organisation, education and activism, rather than through a laborious (and potentially problematic) vetting procedure.

Of course, the debate around what kind of Party one should be building is never ended. It needs to be constantly assessed in the light of a dynamic and always contradictory reality. Certainly, we continue to have these debates. One of the achievements of the AC in the early 1990s was to create a Party platform in which to robustly debate the subject, instead of pretending there were no differences. Even cde Harry Gwala, who was calling for strict democratic centralist discipline within the Party, was happy (and quite legitimately so) to avail himself of the space to launch a spirited rebuttal of no less an “authority” than our general secretary at the time, Joe Slovo!

#### **Negotiations and popular mobilisation**

In the early 1990s the Party had to confront a new reality in which political nego-

tiations occupied an important, if not central, place. How were a revolutionary Party and a broader revolutionary movement to conduct themselves on this terrain? There were divergent strategic perspectives and, frankly, considerable confusion within our movement.

For some comrades, the negotiations were seen as more or less the only show in town. For others, the negotiations were little more than a useful opportunity through which we could create breathing space to build up our forces for the “real thing”, an insurrectionary overthrow of the apartheid regime. Although this latter perspective was certainly never the official view of either the ANC or SACP in this period, it had a resonance within our ranks, and among leadership there was sometimes a populist tendency not to engage frankly with it.

This lies at the core of Raymond Suttner’s important critical analysis of the Bisho massacre in September 1992 (“The Bisho march and massacre: an assessment”, 3<sup>rd</sup> Quarter 1992). Suttner had been a participant in the march in which 33 people were killed and over 300 wounded by Ciskei Bantustan security forces. Without for a moment displacing the burden of blame for the massacre from where it belonged – with the Bantustan and apartheid authorities – Suttner noted that our own strategic and tactical fuzziness had unwittingly contributed to the tragedy. Was the march on the Ciskei Bantustan “capital” Bisho intended as an insurrectionary (if unarmed) overthrow of the “president” Gqozo? Or was it part of a broader mass-driven process of ensuring that people in the Bantustans were not excluded from the political negotiations underway? Suttner writes: “there was no clarity as to the objectives of the [Bisho] campaign... Sometimes we spoke of the

campaign as being for free political activity. . . But a lot of our statements suggested that we would occupy Bisho and thereby remove Gqozo. That seemed to be the understanding of a lot of activists and leadership of the alliance – at every level. And this was expected to set in train a domino effect with Mangope next and Buthelezi following. . . We had raised the temperature in the country, we had put De Klerk under pressure, we had suggested that he would have to choose between his puppet falling, followed by others, or drown our peaceful action in blood. We underestimated his willingness to choose bloodshed.”

Evidence of the same kind of nostalgia for a seemingly “more revolutionary”, more “heroic” approach to struggle surfaced in the immediate aftermath of Chris Hani’s assassination in April 1993. Theo Molaba, then secretary of the SACP Cape Town branch, resigned from the Party in protest against our failure to launch an insurrectionary call at the funeral of cde Hani. Molaba wrote a long letter of resignation to his branch, which the AC then published in full. (We also published the response by a fellow branch member, Fareed Abdullah – 4<sup>th</sup> Quarter, “Inner Party Debate”). Among other things, Molaba asserted: “In the night vigil (at Hani’s funeral) all the regions were calling for revolutionary mass action/war, with the exception of one or two regions. The leadership was out of touch with these sentiments. Who are they representing? How can national ignore regions? . . . This question is linked to forms of struggle. We may decide on certain forms of struggle for the sake of maintaining the “broadness”, the multi-class nature of the NDR. But when we come to an insurrectionary situation those strata will inevitably be alienated. . . Given the nature of the ANC now, it will never support the insurrectionary approach. Is

this sufficient reason why we should not pursue it? The ANC will not support it because of forces dominating it, but the SACP should pursue it because it is the path to power. Chris Hani’s funeral was an occasion to prepare for insurrection, but our leadership failed.”

We deliberately published Molaba’s letter in full because it was representative of some explicit (and probably many more implicit) views still harboured by sections of our rank-and-file membership. It was important for these to be recorded and frankly engaged with.

Notice how in his letter Molaba equates “revolutionary mass action” with “war” and “insurrection”. Ironically, these connotations were exactly what were being argued at the time by the apartheid regime and by various liberal commentators, but of course for their own purposes. When, for instance, the Codesa negotiation process began to stagnate in the first half of 1992 as a result of the regime’s intransigence, the ANC alliance provisionally pulled out of the talks and, on June 16, launched a programme of rolling mass action *in support of* our principal negotiation demands. A whole chorus of liberal media commentators (including Stanley Uys, Lawrence Schlemmer, Frederik Van Zyl Slabbert, Alex Boraine and Ken Owen) immediately condemned the mass action, presenting it as inimical to a negotiated settlement and bordering on insurrectionism. “Keep mass mobilisation out of the picture”, they all sermonised. South Africa, Stanley Uys wrote, will not achieve a new democratic dispensation “unless elites on either side arrange it, as they usually do in history.” (*The Star*, mid-August 1992). (It should be added that there were elements within the ANC leadership who basically shared this view, and who opposed the turn to mass mobilisation on the grounds that it was

“rocking the boat”.)

The apartheid regime was happy to hide behind this “liberal” reading of popular mobilisation and the implication that any such mobilisation was by definition both anti-negotiations and semi-insurrectionary in character. The regime believed that this kind of ideological cover gave it the space to move with its own sinister low intensity conflict strategy.

Looking back on this period a year-and-a-half later, the Editorial Notes in the 4<sup>th</sup> Quarter 1993 AC (“Negotiations – a mass-driven victory”) reflected on how the apartheid regime had: “deliberately planned to turn the mass action against us, to blame our campaign for escalating violence (which would be deliberately fomented). The massacre at Boipatong on June 17 last year, precisely 24 hours after we had launched our mass action campaign, illustrated their strategy. Within hours of the massacre by Inkatha-aligned hostel-dwellers, with clear SAP [SA Police] complicity, official government spokespersons were blaming the mass action for the carnage...But the strategy back-fired. It was too crudely implemented...The regime had also seriously underestimated the capacity of ordinary South Africans to organise themselves under ANC banners. Through June, July and early August 1992 millions and millions of South Africans participated in mass actions of all kinds.”

This 4<sup>th</sup> Quarter 1993 editorial then went on to make another important point about the rolling mass action in mid-1992: “The...liberal press presented this period as one in which negotiations were suspended. In fact, while the central political negotiations were, indeed, suspended, virtually every mass action involved one or another form of negotiation. In the most remote rural localities, where the township marched on the white dorp, it was not just

a question of mass action. In every case, demonstrators carried not just national demands, but local demands. And in virtually every case they negotiated, often for the first time in history with the local power structures, around local demands. They demanded the right to use the local hall, or they called for the release of detained comrades, or they advanced and negotiated for socio-economic demands. *The negotiations process ceased being only a remote, constitutional affair.*” (emphasis added)

Between 1991 and 1993 the AC (together with the SACP’s monthly publication *Umsebenzi*) played a very critical role in helping our Party cadreship and the cadreship of the ANC more broadly to begin to develop a more effective strategic approach to negotiations. Through collective debate, our publications advanced the perspective of a *mass-driven* negotiations process. At the same time, we played a leading role in exposing the regime’s “low intensity conflict” strategy. It was a strategy, we emphasised, that was not primarily driven by anti-negotiations, right-wing extremists – rather, it was an integral part of the regime’s negotiations strategy. To counter it, we argued, required not an offensive military posture on our part (which would simply play into the regime’s strength) but political astuteness. While we supported the suspension of the armed struggle, the SACP’s publications (almost alone at this time) upheld the right of communities to organise self-defence units in the face of the regime’s vicious low intensity conflict violence. Not only did we uphold this right in principle, using *Umsebenzi* we ran a serialised manual on HOW to organise SDUs (it was written by cde Ronnie Kasrils), and Party cadres (among them Kasrils and Chris Hani) played a leading role in the practical organisation of these struc-

tures that helped to save many lives. The self-defence units also helped to raise the morale of communities that were being battered by so-called “third force” (but in practice first force-directed) violence. Quite correctly, we appreciated that all of these initiatives on our part were about strengthening the prospects for effective negotiations, and not an alternative to negotiations.

#### **What room for compromise? The sunset clause debate**

The “What kind of Party?” debate in the pages of the AC was, by its nature, a largely intra-Party matter. With the debate around negotiations and mass mobilisation, the SACP, through its publications, played a leadership role in consolidating a strategic appreciation across our movement. However, the AC in this period was also to become, at least for a while, the focal point itself for the entire national public debate.

This was occasioned by the publication of Joe Slovo’s “Negotiations: What room for compromises?” in the AC, 3<sup>rd</sup> Quarter 1992. It was a brave intervention by Slovo, then a leading ANC negotiator (and by now SACP chairperson). At the foot of the first page of the article is an “Author’s note” which reads: “The views set out here are purely my own individual contribution. They do not reflect at the moment the collective thinking of our alliance or any of its constituents.”

It was a vintage Slovo intervention – politically risky (he was putting his own revolutionary reputation on the line by proposing compromises), but also not without a flourish of personal chutzpah. (Note the wording of Slovo’s opening clarification: “The views... do not reflect *at the moment* the collective thinking of our alliance”).

The intervention came at a critical tip-

ping point in the negotiations process. On September 26 1992, after three months of mass action that had helped expose the complicity of the regime and Inkatha in the violence, bringing fresh international pressure to bear on De Klerk, the apartheid government finally agreed to a bilateral summit with the ANC. The summit marked key shifts in the regime’s position. In the first place it was being forced to accept a bilateral (and not a diluted multilateral) approach to the negotiations, with the incumbent regime face-to-face with the liberation movement. This is what we had always wanted. It marked the failure of the regime’s attempt to project Inkatha as an equal third partner. De Klerk also agreed in principle to a democratically elected Constituent Assembly and an interim government of national unity. However, as Slovo was to note in his intervention, notwithstanding our advances, we were still “clearly not dealing with a defeated enemy”. In these circumstances, precisely (but paradoxically) *because* the momentum had partially shifted to the side of the liberation movement, now was the time to set out principled concessions that we would be prepared to make. We had to seize the moment, Slovo argued, in order to keep the initiative. Let us make principled compromises going forward, rather than compromises while on the back foot – this was his core message.

In particular, Slovo proposed a “sunset clause” in the new constitution to provide for compulsory power-sharing for a fixed number of years in the period immediately following the adoption of the constitution. He also proposed guaranteeing pensions for apartheid-era state employees, and a general amnesty, in exchange for disclosure and with clear cut-off dates and other conditions, in order to take the ground from under the feet of any future counter-revo-

lution. As we know, all of these proposals, first publicly presented in the pages of *The African Communist*, subsequently came to be key pillars of the eventual settlement.

Although the media at the time credited Slovo with inventing the “sunset clause” idea, it was Thabo Mbeki, it seems, who first tentatively floated the idea in the inner circles of the ANC’s top leadership. But it was Slovo, using an SACP platform, who boldly took the proposal into the public domain. He did this quite deliberately: “it is necessary [he notes in the course of his intervention] to emphasise that we should not allow the necessary bargaining postures within the negotiating process to inhibit us from taking our membership (and therefore inevitably, the whole public) into our confidence in relation to *seminal strategic perspectives*. The argument that we should keep the other side in the dark, especially when it comes to possible compromises, has a valid place in the art of negotiations. But it becomes both harmful and counter-productive when it also keeps our support base in the dark in really vital areas; it will eventually attract charges of ‘sell-out’ and departures from accountability.”

Well, it was not “eventually”, but almost immediately, that Slovo’s proposals attracted allegations from within the movement, and especially from within the SACP of “selling-out”.

This was not the first time that Slovo, writing under his personal signature, had risked an intervention of this kind in order to “bell the cat” (one of his favourite phrases, incidentally). On the eve of the June 16 1976 uprisings, he had published his seminal “*South Africa – No Middle Road*” (in *Southern Africa. The New Politics of Revolution*, B. Davidson, J. Slovo, and AR Wilkinson, Penguin, 1976). It was a bold and critical review that broke the silence

on many of the mistakes made by the liberation movement in the launch of the armed struggle in the 1960s. But it was, above all, a passionate defence of our revolutionary struggle. In 1990 he published “*Has Socialism Failed?*” in which there was criticism and self-criticism in regard to the Soviet socialist experiment. But, again, its thrust was a defence of the socialist struggle in the midst of considerable global (and local) left pessimism, confusion and denialism.

Inevitably, Slovo’s 1992 “What room for compromises?” attracted the jibe in some Party circles that he had now moved all the way from *no* middle road to *the* middle road. The following issue of the AC (4<sup>th</sup> quarter 1992), with a black and orange setting sun cover asked the question: “*RID-ING INTO THE SUNSET?*” It featured responses to Slovo’s intervention by Pallo Jordan, Blade Nzimande, Harry Gwala, Raymond Suttner and myself. There were also collective positions on negotiations from the ANC NEC and the ANC Youth League.

As already noted, there were others in our movement who had first developed the idea of a power-sharing, “sunset clause” arrangement. However, there was hesitancy about how to “sell” it to the membership of the movement. There was a tendency to portray the sunset clause proposal (like the Gear macro-economic package later) as “not a compromise”.

It was Slovo who located the sunset clause proposal dialectically within a strategic perspective of a protracted struggle, what Gramsci referred to as a “war of position” in which one sought to make incremental but transformative advances. Yes, Slovo argued, it *was* a compromise. But to move forward with this proposal was not prevarication. In fact, we had to seize the moment, decisively push forward

with the proposal, before we were compelled to compromise on the enemy's terms, or before the negotiations process unravelled entirely.

Over the following months, Slovo's intervention helped to convince a majority within our movement, but the ambivalence still present within the ANC leadership was well captured by two contrasting headlines in the days following the ANC NEC's 25 November 1992 decision to accept the sunset clause package. The *New Nation* had a head-line: "ANC REJECTS COMPROMISE". The *Star* had a head-line: "ANC ACCEPTS COMPROMISE".

#### **The NDR and socialism – build it now?**

Anti-SACP critics on the left, like Terry Bell, still repeat the old mantra that the SACP is stuck in a "Stalinist" "two-stage" theory. Supposedly, the Party believes in two separate revolutions – first a "bourgeois" (ANC-led) national democratic revolution, and then, sometime in a distant thereafter, a second socialist revolution (see, for instance, Bell's recent "Debate needed on Cosatu's SACP agenda", *Business Report*, October 2, 2009).

Ironically, but it is an irony to which we should now have become accustomed, right-wing Africanist opponents of the SACP from within the ANC have also evoked the same two-stage paradigm, but for their own 'rooi-gevaar' (red scare-mongering) purposes. The late Dumisani Makhaye, for instance, alleged in the run-up to the ANC's 2002 51<sup>st</sup> national conference in Stellenbosch, that with our slogan of "socialism is the future, build it now", the SACP was signalling its intention to launch a bloody "October" revolution against the "February" incumbents within government and within the ANC's national leadership!

At the beginning of the 1990s it is true

that there was still considerable ambivalence within the Party and broader movement around the nature of the relationship between the national democratic struggle and the socialist struggle. They still tended to be thought of as separate "stages". Indeed, from more reformist quarters, the argument for a separation into distinct historical moments appeared to have been greatly strengthened by the collapse of the Soviet bloc. "Surely", we were asked rhetorically, "socialism can no longer seriously be on the agenda in any medium-term perspective?" The recent experience of Mozambique was also cited as evidence of the danger of a premature announcement of socialism. "You will simply discredit socialism in the eyes of the majority", we were told. Some of these arguments had merit insofar as they were warning against a hasty and voluntaristic attempt to launch a socialist "great leap-forward". But they were extremely problematic insofar as they were used as arguments to buttress the reformist (anti-Freedom Charter) perspective that the national democratic "stage" of struggle was about an effectively pro-capitalist ANC leading and "completing" a bourgeois revolution in SA, while the SACP parked itself respectfully on the margins.

In the midst of this situation, in order to counter these views the AC editorial collective turned to some of the key historical documents of our movement and of the SACP (in particular, our seminal 1962 programme, *The Road to South African Freedom*, in *South African Communist Speak, 1915-1980*, Inkululeko Publishers, London, 1981). These sources were helpful, but they, too, we discovered contained some ambivalence and imprecision on these matters. The 1962 programme describes national democracy both as a "transitional stage" and as a period of potential "unin-

*interrupted*” advance towards its “consummation”. Presumably “consummation” means socialism – but the 1962 document doesn’t quite say this explicitly, describing “consummation” as “deep-reaching social revolution and the full emancipation of the African peoples from bondage.” (ibid. p.295).

The 1962 programme also describes “national democracy” as a “state [which] will provide the most favourable conditions for advance, along *non-capitalist lines, to socialism*” (ibid.). But what exactly is meant by this negative term (“non-capitalist”)? In its section on the “Immediate proposals of the Communist Party”, the 1962 programme presents a fairly detailed outline of what “non-capitalism” meant. It turns out to be a radical view of our “immediate”, national democratic tasks. For instance on “Economic Development” it says: “the Party will press for the strengthening of the state sector of the economy, particularly in the fields of heavy industry, machine tool building and fuel production. It will seek to place control of the vital sectors of the economy in the hands of the national democratic state to correct historic injustices, by demanding the nationalisation of the mining industry, banking and monopoly industrial establishments, thus also laying the foundation for the advance to socialism.

“At the same time, the state should protect the interests of private business where these are not incompatible with the public interest. It should offer assistance, by way of state loans, to non-monopolist producers, *in return for a state share in their undertakings*, thus paving the way for a gradual and peaceful transition to socialism.” (ibid. pp.316-7)

The 1962 programme prefaces all of this with the qualification “These are not proposals for a socialist *state*. They are propos-

als for the building of a national democratic *state*” (p.315). But, while we were not yet speaking of a socialist *state*, were we perhaps not talking about socialist (or socialist-oriented) *measures* introduced by a national democratic state? And what, if any, are the differences between socialist measures and non-capitalist measures? Were we using the term “non-capitalist” to avoid giving offence to our multi-class, broad church movement? And if so, was this convincing, and was it principled?

We can speculate like this forever, but at least what is obvious is that these “immediate” programmatic demands (presented by the 1962 programme) are significantly different from, for instance, a social democratic “mixed economy”. In the 1962 SACP programme everything is *transitional*. Even state support for non-monopolist sectors of the economy is explicitly designed to introduce public ownership over them – albeit in a “gradual” and “peaceful” way.

Clearly, the 1962 programme was not remotely calling for a stage of “strengthening”, “de-racialising” or “completing” the capitalist revolution, before we could contemplate moving towards a socialist “revolution”. It was calling for “non capitalist”, *transitional reforms* to be integral to a state of national democracy, reforms that would pave the way for an uninterrupted (and hopefully peaceful) advance to socialism.

This was the programmatic legacy that the SACP inherited in 1990. To defend and advance this legacy in a conjuncture in which there was now considerable socialist demoralisation and confusion, and in which reformist illusions were rife within our movement, it became imperative to more boldly establish the links between the South African national democratic struggle and the struggle for socialism. In short, here too, it became necessary to

“bell the cat”.

These themes were central to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Quarter 1992 AC. Its cover headline announced the special focus of the issue: “Stepping stones to socialism. How socialists see South Africa’s economic reconstruction”. “How do we begin to put in place stepping stones to socialism in the period of national democratic transformation itself?” said the foreword to a series of articles by Alec Erwin, the SACP Economics Forum, JJ Kunene and Bheki Langa.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> Quarter 1993 AC followed this line of thought with a cover that first used the now familiar slogan: “Socialism is the future...Build it now!” The Editorial Notes to the issue assert: “The left cannot just be an opposition, awaiting its time in some distant future. The left must also be a force for practical reconstruction...Our programmes must begin, even in the midst of the capitalist order, to build houses, provide education and free health care, to create jobs. The present tripartite Reconstruction Programme, which is in the process of being elaborated, is crucial in this regard...Are we reforming capitalism? Yes, in a sense we are, but not with the intention of rescuing it, or giving it a better name. In the reforms that we seek to implement, we must continually seek to deepen the people’s capacity to make socialism. In our concrete programme we must continually challenge the logic of capitalism, of the ‘free market’, of profits above social needs. We must increasingly take whole sectors of our society – housing, education, healthcare, infrastructure – away from the play of alienated market forces. These social needs must be increasingly decommodified.”

The same issue also published the speech delivered on behalf of the Party by the general secretary at the time, Charles Nqakula, to the Cosatu September 1993

special congress. It was the first public speech on a major occasion to use the slogan “socialism is the future...build it now”. Nqakula told the congress: “In the past few years the SACP has been using the slogan: ‘The Future is Socialism’. We have now changed that slogan, or at least we have added to it. ‘The Future is Socialism – Build it Now!’ But what do we mean by beginning to build it now? We mean that in the election campaign, in the reconstruction programme, in our day-to-day struggles we must be building momentum towards socialism, capacity for socialism, and even elements of socialism.”

As our society moved in a complex, contradictory and often violence-torn way towards the April 1994 democratic breakthrough – the question of future state-power and its relationship to our movement and the broader popular formations of struggle loomed large. This was one more “cat” that required “belling”.

#### **The state and ‘civil society’**

As we all know, there has been a recent outcry, from left and right, around government departments purchasing expensive cars for ministers. Government and the SACP have indicated this is, indeed, an area that needs to be re-considered, with clearer guidelines that balance safety and security concerns with the solidarity principles we seek to uphold in public office.

However, the outcry should also have provoked another question: Why is it that parliamentary opposition parties like the DA can turn the purchase of a car for a minister into a major “scandal”, while some of their own members and major backers drive about in cars equally, if not even more, expensive? We all know what their answer will be. They will say: “Ministers’ cars are bought with *taxpayers’* money, but *our* cars are private purchases.”

And there the matter is supposed to end.

But should it? What lies behind today's "private" purchasing power? Isn't it a history of state-led dispossession, of migrant labour coerced through, amongst other things, the imposition of taxes (the infamous poll tax and the hut tax)? And what of the present exploitation of millions of workers, who travel and labour long hours to earn enough to stay alive? When a mega-rich capitalist proclaims: "It's *my* money. I earned it. I should be free to use it as I please" – why doesn't that provoke scandalised outrage on the front pages of our newspapers?

I am not raising this matter as a diversion from the important question of responsibility and restraint in public office. I am certainly not arguing that if capitalists can do it, why can't ANC ministers. I am trying to render visible what liberalism makes invisible.

Capitalist society, and particularly the liberal ideology that consolidates within it, establish a sharp division between the state and "civil society", between the so-called "public" and "private" spheres. The state is "a necessary evil" that needs constantly "to be checked and balanced". "Civil society" is supposedly a sphere of personal freedom epitomised by the "free" interaction of "equal" citizens on the market (the labour market, the car market, and every other kind of market). Some of these citizens "just happen" to be bosses, while others "just happen" to be workers or the unemployed.

Significantly, the state and "civil society" debate was another major issue sharply debated in the AC of the early 1990s. And it was precisely this radical and problematic separation of "state" from "civil society", of "public" from "private" that lay at the centre of the discussion. The debate was started by a major article jointly au-

thored by Blade Nzimande and Mpume Sikhosana ("Civil society and democracy" 1<sup>st</sup> Quarter 1992). In the December 1991 8<sup>th</sup> SACP congress, the draft constitution and programme had used the term "democratic socialism". A majority of delegates had rejected this "qualification" of socialism, arguing that socialism was inherently democratic. In their article, Nzimande and Sikhosana sought to take this argument beyond a merely semantic difference.

They noted that the crisis of socialism in Eastern Europe, due considerably to the stifling impact of bureaucratic states on what had once been dynamic, local organs of popular power ("soviets"), had resulted in an ideological back-lash against the state and in favour of a vague notion of "civil society democracy". There were two major problems with this "civil society" position, they argued. In the first place: "Underpinning most of these responses to the crisis of socialism is the stripping of democracy of its class content, and the tendency to talk about 'democracy in general'" (p.37).

And, in the second place: "The state is presented as, by its very nature, incapable of playing a role in the democratisation process...this assumption prevents us from exploring the question of the nature of the national democratic and socialist states that should be constructed in order to deepen democracy...If the state is inherently unable to contribute to a process of democracy...we might as well forget about struggling for the capture or seizure of state power." (p.41)

In the next issue of AC (2<sup>nd</sup> Quarter 1992), Mzwanele Mayekiso ("Working class civil society") and Pat Horn ("I am not convinced") responded. Mayekiso argued that it was necessary and possible to distinguish between a working class civil society and a bourgeois civil society. And in the fol-

lowing issue (3<sup>rd</sup> Quarter 1993), Nzimande and

Sikhosana responded to their critics (“‘Civil society’ and democracy: a rejoinder”): “Mayekiso does not answer our most serious charge against the protagonists of ‘civil society’, i.e., the failure to relate the question of ‘civil society’ to the struggle for state and political power ... whilst Mayekiso agrees ... in seeing ‘civil society’ as a *contested terrain*, he continues to talk about two ‘civil societies’, as if ‘civil society’ can be owned by one particular class. We would rather talk about *working class hegemony* in society.” (pp.70 and 71)

It is possible to recognise in these interventions, seeking to establish a dynamic connection between the state and popular struggle, the early outlines of the SACP’s later “Medium Term Vision” of “building working class hegemony in all sites of power – including the state”. These early 1990s debates also underpin our current special national conference discussion document’s call for a “mass-driven, state-led programme of radical transformation.”

#### **The April 1994 democratic breakthrough**

The 1<sup>st</sup> Quarter 1994 AC was an election campaign issue. “Towards a massive ANC election victory” was the headline of the main editorial. It explained that the SACP’s support for the ANC was based on: “two important principles:

- A transparent, bottom-up nominations process for the ANC election lists.
- An election campaign and an election manifesto that are not just the normal and vague ‘pre-election promises’, but which are based on a clear programme for national democratic transformation.”

And it elaborated: “In developing the

Reconstruction and Development Programme parallel with the election campaign, the alliance has succeeded in fighting a campaign that is about real popular concerns – peace, jobs, houses and education. In the people’s and worker forums the alliance has developed a fairly unique form of participatory campaigning... listening to the people and not just talking to them...”

But after the elections, would the ANC leadership follow through on the promises of the RDP and on the mass-based approach to politics? Both before and immediately after the election campaign, the AC editorial team knew very well that these were matters that could not be taken for granted. It would involve a struggle within our Party and our movement.

Some of our major concerns seemed to be confirmed by the editorial of the May/June 1994 issue of *Mayibuye*, the ANC’s official journal. It had a cover photo of Impala jets flying over President Mandela’s inauguration. “FREE AT LAST!” was the banner headline. The editorial of *Mayibuye* proclaimed: “The moment has arrived. Liberation. Real change. National Democratic Revolution. Call it what you may.”

While sharing the *Mayibuye* editorialists’ sense of accomplishment and joy at the election outcome, we couldn’t help noticing that they didn’t seem to know what exactly to call it. Of more concern, was the potentially demobilising impact of this hyped-up version of a nonetheless very important mile-stone. These demobilising tendencies were further enhanced by the rest of the *Mayibuye* editorial, which having hyped-up the moment, then began to reverse gears, quoting the 19<sup>th</sup> century liberal thinker Alexis de Tocqueville on the dangers of raising too many popular expectations. The *Mayibuye* editorial pro-

ceeded: “In June, allocations from the budget will be decided upon. A modest beginning can then be made...Now, ordinary people will rejoice only at the *sight* of the foundation of the first of the million houses...”

“Ordinary people are reduced to spectators” of a top-down delivery process, the SACP Central Committee’s June 1994 discussion document noted critically of this passage. Indeed, the CC discussion document devoted several pages to discussing and critiquing the *Mayibuye* editorial (see AC, 2<sup>nd</sup> Quarter 1994, “The present political situation. A Central Committee Discus-

sion Document”).

Much to the irritation of some our comrades in the ANC, the SACP’s own response to the election victory came with our 2<sup>nd</sup> Quarter 1994 issue of AC. It had a bright red cover asserting: “South Africa after the elections. A LUTA CONTINUA”. Over the following decade that proved to be both a valid slogan and a prediction that turned out to be even truer than we perhaps had realised at the time.

But therein lies another story... ★

*Cde Cronin is SACP Deputy General Secretary and Deputy Editor-in-Chief of AC*

## 50 YEARS OF AC

## AC and radical perspectives in the arts

**Ben Dikobe Martins** says AC made it possible for cultural activists, through a heightened political consciousness, to move beyond depicting effective revolutionary conduct in various art forms

**T**he *African Communist* had its baptism of fire in intellectual ferment 50 years ago as the South African Communist Party's organ of agitation and protest against stultifying political views, laws, traditions and social hierarchies based on race, class and gender.

Throughout its fighting years, under the iron heel of apartheid repression and banning, the AC as it became and is still popularly and fondly known, became a regular target of security police attention and action to silence its progressive views on politics, art and culture.

To avoid the attention of the apartheid publications, censor board and the security police, the SACP resorted to disguising the covers of the AC as books on gardening and cooking and other leisurely, innocuous hobbies like bird watching. It was in this guise that the AC was able to trumpet its call for revolution and revolt.

Through some of its editions and pages it articulated the message that arts and culture are a fundamental pillar in the transformation of apartheid society and were to be a cornerstone of the national democratic society to be built.

This premise rang true to musicians like Jonas Gwangwa, who led the

African National Congress Amandla Music Ensemble and to artists, writers and poets like Keorapetsi Kgotstistile, Wally Mongane Serote, Thami Mnyele, Sankie Nkondo, Thandi Modise, Baleka Mbete and Jeremy Cronin who were also cadres of *Umkhonto we Sizwe*. Through theory, practice and activism in struggle they came to realise and appreciate the importance of the arts as a means to liberate the oppressed from the shackles of mental slavery that held them in the thrall of inferiority complexes that resulted from the debasement, undermining and ridicule of indigenous cultural norms, religious practices and art forms. These artists, among others, realised that this psychological scorched-earth policy made it near impossible for the oppressed people, terrorised by the uniformed police, security police and members of the South African Defence Force to challenge those in power, who's brutal might was daily visited upon them with impunity and wanton cruelty.

It was from the AC informed perspective that some of these class-conscious artists argued in the pages of the *Staffrider* journal and other journals that the arts as an expression of culture were not politically neutral, but served the in-

terests of opposing classes in society. They argued that it was impossible for the arts to be neutral, as it was impossible for any product of human labour, to be detached from its conditions of production and reception. For instance, in support of this argument they pointed out the propaganda radio serials in vernacular that inveighed on the so-called evils of the African National Congress-led armed struggle and the so-called evils of communism, and argued that this was in contrast to the ruling National Party elite and the South African Defence Force which were portrayed as the upholders of Christian values and projected as heroic and just. These progressive cultural workers argued that these portrayals were, to the degree that they were successful as art, objectively in the interests of the apartheid oppressor and ruling class.

Class-conscious artists and writers further held the view that cultural products that presented the oppressed majority of South Africans who have very little or no money or power as innately stupid, lazy or depraved, and thus unworthy of money or power, were working in the interests of the ruling class and the apartheid power structure.

For class-conscious artists and writers it became a fallacy to speak of art-for-arts-sake. That is, the ideology that art is justified by its existence, that it does not and should not serve any social purpose, that it frequently has no reference to anything outside itself, and that it is expressive of the vision of the individual artist, writer or poet, if of anything.

Contrary to this view it was argued, for instance, that apartheid radio script writers knew exactly who they were writing for and what message they sought to convey and who would pay

them for their endeavors.

The progressive cultural worker view was that not mentioning overtly political issues did not mean disengaging from them, but was itself a political act and a conspiracy of silence, that served that interests of the oppressor class.

It was against the afore-going background that Bertolt Brecht's *Writing the Truth: Five Difficulties* became the credo for progressive artists and writers. Brecht, the German Communist, poet and playwright wrote that:

Nowadays, anyone who wishes to combat lies and ignorance and write the truth must overcome at least five difficulties. He or she must have the *courage* to write the truth when truth is everywhere opposed; the *keenness* to recognise it, although it is everywhere concealed; the *skill* to manipulate it as a weapon; the *judgment* to select those in whose hands it will be effective; and the *cunning* to spread the truth among such persons.

These were formidable problems for artists, writers and poets living under apartheid. But the political discourse and critical debate that took place in the pages of the AC made it possible to critically engage with newfangled ideas on a variety of issues and subjects. The AC, furthermore, more clearly than many other journals, fore-grounded and showed the interrelationship between social, political and economic factors and helped to remove ideological blinkers. By so doing, the AC had an impact on transforming our lives and personal values and in encouraging us to engage in the liberation struggle.

It thus made it possible to discover radical and revolutionary perspectives in the arts, which made it possible to de-

pict life critically and in a manner that did more than just express despair and anger at the apartheid order, but which showed the possibility of change and a democratic non-racial society.

It was with the benefit of this political consciousness that I wrote the paper “The Necessity of Art for National Liberation” which was delivered at the Culture and Resistance Festival in 1982, in Gaborone Botswana, in which I argued among other things that “As politics must teach people the ways and give them the means to take control over their own lives, art must teach people, in the most vivid and imaginative ways possible, how to take control over their own experience and observations, how to link these with the struggle for liberation and a just society free of race, class and exploitation.”

This radical approach enabled us to speak and write on the arts, not as the

persons best qualified to do so, but as those who felt it necessary to express their views from a Marxist perspective. In doing so we did not presume that we knew more than others, nor did we presume that our points of view were infallible, and that all who did not share our views were mistaken. We did not seek false modesty, but true evaluation of what we argued for.

In sum, the AC made it possible for us, through a heightened political consciousness, to take an added step over and above depicting effective revolutionary conduct in various art forms, and to engage in the highest and most dangerous art form of all – revolutionary armed struggle as members and operatives of *Umkhonto we Sizwe*. ★

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## 50 YEARS OF AC: AND INTO THE FUTURE

## Challenges in producing *The African Communist* and *Umsebenzi* today

We're doing well, but we owe it to our proud history to do better, for our Party, for our country and for Africa, writes **Yunus Carrim**

### On the way here

**M**y first encounter with SACP literature was as a student activist at the University of Durban Westville between 1975 and 1977. I cannot recall when – was it 1975? – I got copies of *Inkululeko* and *Vukani*. They used to be 2 or 4 pages usually, cyclostyled copies, though the copies I got seemed to be photocopied. They were easy to make copies of, and I did, but not many. ACs, I saw very few copies of, originals, I think, the pocket-sized ones, but they were never given to me, only lent, and taken away overnight by the students who passed them on to me. I was told not to copy them, and I dutifully didn't. What "duty" I now ask myself?

But then came my prize possession, the biography of *Moses Kotane*, a small copy, with tiny print, with a plain white cover. Whoever lent it to me – who was it? – never asked for it back. So I kept it and I lent it selectively to a few other students. It made me feel important and increased my credibility. I was not connected to any SACP or ANC underground structure, but those I lent it to might have thought so. I never said I did belong to any SACP structure but I didn't say I didn't either. Anyway, my

student friends were not supposed to ask me, and I was not supposed to say. The *Inkululeko* and *Vukani* copies, I think, were produced by Comrade Raymond Suttner's Durban cell. Or they could have been by Comrade Jeremy Cronin's Cape Town cell – though I think the former. It was obvious that some of the students I interacted with were quite connected or connected to people who were connected. One rumour I recall was that a source of some of the banned literature was the daughter of a former senior leader of the Natal Indian Congress who had drifted away from the struggle and had no interest in the material that reached him and let his daughter dispose of it.

Later, while on a scholarship in England, I got easy, legal access to AC, and I read all copies – and though they reflected a much better sense of what was going on in the country and took up many relevant debates, they had somehow lost their dazzle. I didn't always find them helpful. I had become more aware of some of the failures of the Soviet Union, other socialist countries, and national liberation movements in the "Third World". I was exposed to *New Left Review*, *Monthly Review* and *Socialist Register* and the like. And at university and elsewhere I interacted with

Marxist and national liberation activists from all over the world. When I got back home, I found ACs circulating more freely than in the 70s, including the original-sized ones. I read them, but often found *The South African Labour Bulletin*, *Work in Progress*, *Social Review* and *Transformation* more useful.

Did the ACs have to be so rigid? Of course, we owe a huge debt to the Soviet Union and other socialist countries. Indeed, where would we have been with-out them?? Understandably, it would have been difficult, but surely there was some room at least to raise questions about the lack of democracy and other failures of the Soviet Union without alienating our allies, and in the interests of the global struggle for socialism? Of course, there was a bitter ideological war globally, the Cold War no less, and we ourselves were, in our country, facing a vicious, highly repressive apartheid regime and were waging a political, armed and underground struggle in conditions where there was limited room for democracy – but did we have to be so unconditional in our support for the Soviet Union?

There was a huge battle of ideas and contestation for hegemony from the mid-70s in the country, but the AC could have been more adroit in responding to the Black Consciousness, “Workerist” and other streams in the national liberation struggle. Comrade Joe Slovo’s astute 1988 paper, *The South African Working Class and the National Democratic Revolution*, came almost too late as the tensions between “Workerists” and “Populists” had eased by then, even if they persisted. And of, course, his seminal “Has Socialism Failed?” finally came around to acknowledging some of the key failures of the Soviet Union. It was in many respects too late, but in some key respects, just at the right time – as

Communist Parties had to take stock and adapt to the changed situation. The paper – and more importantly the context that precipitated it – also partly influenced the way the SACP reconstituted itself as a legal party in the country. And in the new conditions we found a new type of AC – much more open, lively, vigorous; much more immediately linked to the struggles on the ground; much more of a forum for debate. And it dealt with issues that had major consequences for our struggle – the lifting of the armed struggle; the relationship between mass struggles and negotiations; “sunset clauses” for a transitional government; the relationship of the SACP to our Alliance partners in the new conditions of democracy; and much else besides. The Party’s other more regular (sometimes monthly, as against the quarterly AC) publication, *Umsebenzi*, was also very much on the ball. Those years – perhaps from 1990 to 1996 – were the best years of the AC and *Umsebenzi* since our unbanning. Those were very exciting, uncertain, interesting times both in our country and internationally.- and activists in our movement – not just the SACP, but the broader mass democratic movement – were very interested in ideas and doing practical things with ideas. The AC and *Umsebenzi* have since lost some of their resonance – yet they remain useful publications, and could become even better. So how do we manage at present?

#### **This is how it is**

I took over editing *Umsebenzi* five years ago. “Took over” implies a voluntary decision. It wasn’t. I was simply told by the General Secretary that he had too much on his plate, and had discussed the matter with the National Treasurer, and they felt that I should now edit *Umsebenzi*. And the next PB approved of this, as well as the

proposal that the GS serves as Editor-in-Chief and Deputy GS as Deputy Editor-in-Chief. After the 12<sup>th</sup> Congress of the SACP in July 2007 I was appointed PB Secretary for Internal Media, and took over editing AC from Comrade Jeremy Cronin.

We now have an Editorial Board that oversees both *Umsebenzi* and *The African Communist*. We hardly ever meet as a Board but interact regularly through email and by phone. All the Board members see edited versions of all articles and the Editor-in-Chief browses through them and, as time permits, goes through the key articles, especially those referred to him by the Editor. The Editor-in-Chief also reviews the first proofs. Both the Editor-in-Chief and the Deputy Editor-in-Chief also write frequently for both *Umsebenzi* and AC. We have tried to get the SACP Provincial Executive Committees to appoint provincial correspondents for *Umsebenzi*, but have had little success.

*Umsebenzi* is intended as a regular, popular, accessible newsletter that serves to inform, educate, entertain, empower, mobilise, organise and unite people in the cause of socialism. More specifically, it is meant to convey knowledge and information about SACP theories, perspectives, policies, strategies, tactics and campaigns, and encourage SACP members and others to offer their views on these and other issues.

*Umsebenzi* seeks to be an organ of open, lively and vibrant debate. It is meant to be an organizing tool of the party. A key aspect of *Umsebenzi*'s role is to develop a broader continental and internationalist awareness, consciousness and solidarity by focusing on developments outside the country. *Umsebenzi* is also meant to communicate about the SACP to Left and progressive organisations in and outside the country.

AC seeks to fulfil most of the goals of *Umsebenzi*. But, of course, AC is a journal, as against the paper that *Umsebenzi* is, and focuses more on theoretical, policy and strategic issues.

AC and *Umsebenzi* are discussed fairly widely in the ranks of the SACP and some other sections of the movement. They are particularly effective when they coincide with Party events like Augmented CCs, Provincial Councils, Political Education Seminars, Special Conferences, Congresses, and the like, and more so when they deal with issues that are also being addressed at these gatherings. They are also more effective when they coincide with rallies, such as our Anniversary rallies, May Day rallies, and so on. From what we can tell, they are also read more widely than usual, including by people opposed to the SACP, when they carry articles dealing with the character of the transformation and the nature of the Alliance – and when these articles coincide with broader discourse on these issues in the media and in the ranks of the movement as a whole. Some of the issues first raised in articles in the AC have subsequently had an enormous impact. For example, the notion of the “1996 Class Project” first surfaced in the AC. The critiques in *Umsebenzi* and AC of BEE (Black Economic Empowerment) and the call instead for BEE to be broad-based were also effective. And so too with several other issues raised in *Umsebenzi* and AC. The value of AC and *Umsebenzi* is also linked to the General Secretary's fortnightly *Umsebenzi Online* that appears on the Party's website and the occasional SACP publication, *Bua Komanisi*

Understandably, it's quite challenging producing *Umsebenzi* and AC. Over the past five years we've produced an average of six, instead of 10, copies of *Umsebenzi* and two, instead of four, copies of AC per

year. *Umsebenzi* was given a new spurt of life three years ago when we drew in media expert and layout sub-editor David Niddrie, who works closely with a former South African now living in Canada, Tony Sutton, to produce the classy (in the technical sense) A4 design we have now, and which has been commented on so favourably by so many people, instead of the tabloid version we've been having since 1990. It's not just so nice to look at, but user-friendly and easier to manage while reading. We are especially grateful to Comrade Niddrie for his outstanding layout work, done for a small fee compared to its value. He has been inspirational, even if too much of a perfectionist. On average *Umsebenzi* is a 28-pages issue. The present October issue is 36 pages. So although we don't produce the 10 issues a year that we want, the issues are in general larger than we've envisaged.

*Umsebenzi* is both easier and more difficult to edit than AC. Easier because the articles are shorter, and so more comrades can be induced to write; but more difficult because the comrades who write are less adept at writing in English than those who write for AC, and so the editing requires much more time. Sadly, we do not get articles in the indigenous languages. We encourage comrades to write in any of our languages – but in the past five years we have received only two articles in an indigenous language – both in Zulu. It's interesting too that our Alliance partners with many more members and greater resources than us have not fared much better either in this regard with their publications.

Those who write for *Umsebenzi* are far too few, and for AC even fewer. And given the historical circumstances and legacies of the past, those who write are by no means

demographically representative of our membership. We have been encouraging a younger generation of African writers to emerge from the ranks of the SACP. A small sliver has – but nowhere near what we need. It's difficult to get comrades to write. We discuss this every now and then – how to get new and more comrades to write – but with few results. For example, we had a very good three-day media workshop with about 60 comrades at the beginning of the year. Participants were very enthusiastic – but we got very little back in the way of articles for *Umsebenzi*.

We have very rarely not used an article received. When we do it is mainly because the articles reached us far too late or gets lost in the system – but these would make up less than 1% of the articles.

*Umsebenzi* carries a range of articles, including on theoretical and policy issues, CC statements, campaigns, Provincial Councils, branch activities and international events. We also at times carry profiles of key activists. "Our Letters to the Editor Column" has, most unfortunately, faded over the past two years, and the rare letter we receive is converted into an article, however brief. We carried a short "Introduction to Marxism" series for a while. Our sports and cultural pages have also faded in the past 2 years. Branch news has dropped.

Most issues of *Umsebenzi* carry YReds, the newspaper of the YCL. This is edited by the YCL National Secretary, Buti Manamela.

This will be the sixth issue of AC since the beginning of 2007. But if it's twice a year, they are on average about 80 pages. A key theme in the past two years has been the nature of the relationship between the SACP and its Alliance partners. A relatively new issue raised is the prospect of the SACP standing on our own

in elections as part of a more comprehensive approach to state power. Other articles carried deal with the nature of the relationship between the national democratic and socialist struggles; the implications of the ANC's Polokwane Conference; the financial sector campaign; patriarchy; the economy; and cooperatives. The last AC issue was particularly useful on the nature of the global financial and economic crisis and its impact on South Africa.

Of course, these are very different times from the underground period and the early 90s, and the AC cannot be as resonant today as it was in those periods. The type of AC we can have is related significantly, though by no means wholly, to the broader social and political context in which it appears. But we could do better. Sadly, our African and international focus has receded. We get very few articles from activists involved in struggles in other countries on the continent and elsewhere. It could be argued that we are less *The African Communist* and more *The South African Communist*. But though our international subscribers are few, our sense is that the website versions of the AC and *Umsebenzi* are read in significant numbers. There is certainly much international interest in our Party, as is repeatedly confirmed every time we travel out of the country or receive foreign guests, and if the numbers of foreign parties that attend our Congresses is to go by.

Overall, it seems to me, the AC has been doing moderately well, the resource and other constraints considered. But we have to do much better. Which means we have to confront our challenges more directly, and in a phased, pragmatic manner, overcome them.

#### **What we might do**

We're doing fine. But why aren't we doing better? Partly, it would seem, it's the changed times. The success of the AC in previous periods is partly related to the context of the times – the strenuous and exciting challenges of the underground period and then, later, the early 90s. These are, quite simply, less exciting times. Or that's how they are seen. While the challenges of transformation persist, it would seem, that in general, comrades in the movement as a whole are not as driven as in previous contexts. In some senses, it would seem that there is less interest in issues of theory and policy and strategy than before. In general the culture of reading seems to have receded. Leaders of all the Alliance partners have bemoaned this over the years. But if this is the case, why has this reading culture receded? And if it's in general true, it's also the case that there is a strata of comrades, particularly younger ones, who show a very keen interest in reading Party literature – and they engage very enthusiastically with Party and other documents in the Political Education Schools the Party organises. We need a discussion on the culture of reading in our movement – and maybe even the broader society.

Challenging too is the lack of interest in writing – in any language. You really have to pester comrades to write. So often you come across a comrade who's very articulate and insightful, and you say please write out what you've said for use in *Umsebenzi*, a short piece, a page even. It rarely comes, and if it does, there's usually, not always, a significant gap between the quality of what's been said and what's been written. Of course, many people, the world over, whatever language they speak, find it challenging to write, and freeze when it comes to putting thoughts to paper. Could it be that it's more pronoun-

ced in our country? If this is so, why? Is it just the legacy of apartheid? Is it just that people are reluctant to write because they feel they must write in English and English is not their first language, or is it writing in any language that proves to be challenging? We need a more in-depth discussion about this reluctance to write. But even more important, we need to find answers to this. It's probably a challenge not just in the SACP but the movement as a whole, and the broader society. So there are broader issues raised inevitably about our education system – are we producing enough people who write easily and develop an interest in writing – in any language, of course? Clearly, the practical challenges notwithstanding, we need to ensure that our publications carry articles in indigenous languages.

There are also changes in the broader media context that we have to acknowledge to better understand our challenges. With electronic media having advanced so much, we need to see our media less anchored in a traditional printed newspaper or journal. Also many of the comrades who used to write are now absorbed in various vocations, including in government, the public service and business, and cannot find the time to write. But also many comrades in the Party also communicate SACP positions through radio (in all the languages), and, in the case of some of the senior comrades, through television and by writing pieces for the newspapers. These and other issues relating to the changed media environment may also explain some of the challenges in getting comrades to engage more with the AC and *Umsebenzi*. We need to discuss more clearly the implications of changes in the media industry for AC and *Umsebenzi*.

We need to maybe consider too how we

make *Umsebenzi*, in particular, more jazzy, more hip, so that it appeals to young people in particular outside the Party.

There are the inevitable challenges in distribution too. Usually, we produce about 5 000 copies of each, though on special occasions, such as for our main rally on the eve of the elections in April this year, we have gone up to 20 000 copies. Strictly, every person who is on our debit order system is entitled to AC and *Umsebenzi* – but clearly the cost of the postage alone will destroy us financially. So we send the issues only to those who are direct subscribers to the publications. But we know that erratic and haphazard as the distribution system is, our publications do reach the ground – and we get mostly very positive feedback on *Umsebenzi* (and not just from those whose photographs appear in it – and you should not underestimate how important this is – and maybe why not?)

Of course, despite all our big ideas, we never get back the money that is due to the Party Head Office – and we are constantly financially challenged. Has there ever been a publication of any of our movement's structures that has paid for itself? Frankly, if it were not for the generosity and understanding of Mr Niran Singh of Shereno Printers we would have found it very difficult to produce AC and *Umsebenzi*. Ideally, those who are employed must pay for *Umsebenzi* and AC – it conveys a sense of being serious and having ownership and being committed. It is a political act – and we need to encourage this more. But it's not as if even if everybody cooperates that we'll be financially sustainable any time soon. We have to more actively raise funds for our media. But we could also save on costs if we produced media within the Alliance cooperatively. If the ANC, SACP and

Cosatu shared resources, our separate costs would be reduced. Given the changed relations within the Alliance this is possible. Of course, each partner in the Alliance would retain its independent publications and positions, but we could also, as necessary, produce joint Alliance publications. It might also, over time, facilitate consensus on the prospects of launching a progressive newspaper.

As for ensuring AC and *Umsebenzi* are more effectively used in the Party, we should draw on them more in our political education workshops. In terms of section 5.3 of the SACP Constitution, a person who joins the party is given interim membership for a year during which the member is meant to familiarise him/herself with the SACP Constitution and principles and policies. Of course, this is not happening in practice. It should be – and where it does, *Umsebenzi* and AC should be used as part of the programme to prepare interim members for full membership.

So, in a nutshell, we will have to address at least the following issues to make progress over time:

- Making the AC and *Umsebenzi* more exciting and relevant to our times, and with *Umsebenzi* in particular, ways of reaching younger people outside the Party
- Revitalising the culture of reading.
- Encouraging a culture of writing.
- Adjusting to technological and other changes in the media environment
- Improving our distribution.
- Improving our financial situation.
- Working cooperatively with our Alliance partners to produce our media.

- Employing a full-time journalist.
- Appointing provincial correspondents.
- Using AC and *Umsebenzi* more effectively in our Party activities
- Encouraging comrades to write in the indigenous languages.
- Increasing coverage of our continent and international events more generally.

We need to discuss how we do each of these things at the “50 Writing and Fighting Years” seminar on the AC at which this issue is being released, and also within the Party and Alliance structures over the next year. Of course, there’s more to that we can do. But this for now. And we need to take decisions on the issues raised above reasonably soon.

#### **Such a proud history**

Editing this issue has been quite inspiring, and served to remind me of the AC’s long and proud history, and of how many people sacrificed how much to produce AC over these 50 years, and in particular the “clandestine years”, and more especially the first few years. We can’t let this history down. We need to build on it. Putting this issue together has certainly motivated me to do more, in cooperation with others, to make AC and *Umsebenzi* work better. I take it you too are inspired and motivated by this issue. How can you not be? So act then! Write! The next deadline for AC is 27 November! Our Special Congress issue! ★

*Cde Carrim is a Central Committee and Politburo member and the Editor of AC and Umsebenzi*





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*“We know capitalism in Africa.  
We have seen it and suffered under it”*

*The African Communist, 3rd Quarter 1959*

*“Socialism is the future  
– build it now!”*

*The African Communist, 3rd Quarter 1993*