

July 13, 1978

To the Political Committee and National Field Organizers

Dear Comrades,

Enclosed is a copy of a May 31, 1978 letter from Ernest Harsch to John Blair of the IMG's Africa Commission. The documents referred to in Comrade Harsch's letter are preliminary drafts, on the basis of which discussion is being carried out, and do not necessarily reflect the final positions of the comrades concerned.

Comradely,



Gus Horowitz

May 31, 1978
c/o P.O. Box 116
Varick Street Station
New York, N.Y. 10014
USA

John Blair
England

Dear Comrade Blair,

Enclosed is a copy of the rough draft of one of the chapters of the book I'm working on. It is the only one that will touch on the South African Trotskyist groups and the Unity Movement in any detail. If you have the time to take a look at it, I would greatly appreciate it. I would particularly like to crosscheck as many of the factual details as possible, such as the people involved, the dates, etc. Some of the material I got from Franz J.T. Lee's works, which, unfortunately, are shot through with factual errors. For instance, he says that Goolam Gool was in the Workers Party, but other sources placed him in FIOSA. Was there a cross-over, or is Lee just wrong? I also need the first names for some figures, such as Bullac and Averbach. In addition, any suggestions you might have on the evaluation of the groups would be welcome. I'm not trying to be exhaustive, but I think it's important for me to at least hit on the most important points.

I'm sending you, by separate mail, a good bit of the SA Trotskyist material that you don't have access to in Britain. It's almost everything you listed, except for the internal discussion material and the WIL's Socialist Action (which is awkward to copy because of its large format). When I get a chance in the next week or so, I hope to send the rest off as well, and compare your list of Unity Movement documents to what we have here. Of the Trotskyist documents that we don't have, we would of course like you to send as much as possible (except for the Spark, which I'll write to Louis Sinclair about). I'm especially interested in the 1934 May Day Manifesto of the Lenin Club, which I quote in the book (so far using Lee as my only source).

You've been pressing me for my views on the South Africa discussion now under way in Britain. After reading the discussion pieces you sent me, I feel obliged to make at least a few initial remarks. The points that follow are not a rounded elaboration of my views, nor are they intended as a formal contribution to the discussion. I'm basically just responding to a few aspects of the discussion documents on South Africa in general, focusing on those points that I tend to differ on, or have a different approach toward, as well as raising a couple of additional suggestions.

I have to preface my comments first of all by stating that I agree with the characterization in Comrade Cunvin's "Notes Towards a Draft Set of Thesis..." that in South Africa there is "a situation where the struggle for national and class emancipation is combined in one struggle. The overthrow of white rule and its replacement by the majority--the black people--will be simultaneously the destruction of capitalism and its replacement by the dictatorship of the proletariat." Similarly I agree with Cunvin's statement in "Draft Theses on South Africa (preliminary draft)" that "The national and social revolutions are not separate stages but one revolution whose victory will mean the establishment of a black proletarian dictatorship in South Africa."

In our analyses of South African society, it is, of course, important to stress the capitalist nature of the state and the economy and the use the ruling class makes of national oppression to deepen the exploitation of the Black working class. This is especially vital for us in countering the lopsided presentations of other political forces, most of whom focus largely on the oppression of Blacks as a people, to the virtual exclusion of the oppression of most of them as a working class as well. The Stalinists do take note of class exploitation, but it makes little difference in their class-collaborationist political practice, which can only lead to betrayal of both the class and national struggles. Our task is to clearly explain the dead-end of Stalinist policies and to offer the revolutionary socialist alternative. The bourgeois liberals have their own reasons for hiding the symbiotic relationship between white racist rule and capitalist domination: the perpetuation of both. On the other hand, many of the Black nationalists struggling against the regime simply do not yet clearly see the interconnection between class and national oppression. Since the vast bulk of them are sincere and committed fighters for freedom, we should have an extremely open and nonsectarian approach toward them, working with them where possible toward specific goals, while patiently explaining our views and winning them over to revolutionary socialism.

In doing all this, however, I think we should be extremely careful not to oversteer our propaganda work toward a fixation primarily on the class oppression inherent in South African society, and not to slight the very real national oppression that Blacks face on a day-to-day basis. Today the two are inseparably tied to each other, but they are not entirely synonymous. National oppression, after all, began well before the full development of capitalist property relations in South Africa; it arose in the early, essentially precapitalist, landgrabbing operations of the Dutch settlers, and was later extended by the British. When the capitalist mode of production came into its own in the late nineteenth century with the opening of the diamond and gold mines, the mineowners saw the pre-existing national oppression of the Black population as a ready-made mechanism for the creation of a cheap, superexploited, rightless Black working class. Toward this end they embraced the racist system of rule established by the early Dutch and British settlers. They strengthened it, and they remolded it to suit their own particular needs.

The capitalists secured their dominance by the end of the Boer War, but remnants of precapitalist society still survived for a while. For a brief period in some of the African reserves, until they were totally harnessed to the needs of the capitalist economy. And for a longer period on the smaller white-owned farms, where some of the African workforce was allowed limited use of land in return for their labor on a noncash basis. Today the vast bulk of the Black population has been proletarianized, or at least partly so, whether they have managed to retain their insecure urban residency rights or are forced to work on a migratory labor basis, with their families in the reserves and their jobs in "white" South Africa.

I think that Comrade Cunvin's comment that "the colour bar...conceals this basic class conflict and gives it the appearance of a racial conflict" loses sight of the fact that racist rule has been retained not just to "mystify" the class conflict, but is an integral part of the entire system of capitalist rule in South Africa. Moreover, the national oppression that Blacks face affects all of them--including the small handful of professionals, petty traders, and even the Indian merchants--not just the Black workers, and even them not just on a class basis. All Blacks are oppressed as Blacks. The extent of this and the means with which it is implemented have been so well documented and commented on that there's really no need to elaborate on it here. I think the tendency among Black activists in South Africa to move initially against the various aspects of their oppression as Blacks is a clear indication of how deeply and directly it is felt.

Perhaps much of this is assumed in the several documents produced by the comrades in Britain, and perhaps it was not felt necessary to elaborate on it to any extent in the preliminary discussion. But in any comprehensive and well-rounded analysis of South Africa I think it is vital to explain more fully just what national oppression means to the Black majority and how it functions in its particular aspects. Doing so is necessary to give the proper balance and to show concretely how capitalism and racist rule work together. Such a balance, I think, would also make our call for a combined revolution more comprehensible to the Black activists we seek to win over.

On a related matter, I must admit that I am astounded that both comrades Cunvin and Hunt reject the characterization of the South African regime as colonialist. Cunvin states, "The relationship between the white rulers of South Africa and the Black majority was never of the nature of colonialism, unless we use the term strictly in a political and not economic context." The last phrase suggests that Cunvin is perhaps using the term colonialism in a different sense than Marxists generally do. Isn't the difference between colonialism and other, more indirect forms of imperialist domination precisely the political factor, that is, the direct control by the imperialist power over the state of the subjugated country?

Leaving aside the present situation for the moment, how can one possibly say that the relationship was "never" a colonial one? Were not the Cape Colony, Natal, the Orange Free State, and the South African Republic (Transvaal) originally established as colonial-settler states? Were not the Cape and Natal direct British colonies for much of their existence in the nineteenth century, and the other two intermitently even before they were decisively defeated by the British? Did not white colonialists from Europe come to South Africa, conquer the African population as in the rest of the continent, steal their land and cattle, and plunder the area's vast mineral wealth? Did not the white rulers exploit the African masses as slaves and forced laborers, as in Angola, Mozambique, the Belgian-ruled Congo, and numerous other African colonies?

Why is it, as Hunt says, "nonsense to talk about a society at one level colonialist, and at another modern capitalist?" Since when are colonialism and advanced capitalism contradictory? Or did the relationship between the conquerors and the conquered change fundamentally after the capitalist mode of production began to gain dominance at the end of the last century? Did the white "masters" somehow cease to be colonialists with the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910? Did they abandon their colonial-type system of forced labor? Did they grant national self-determination to the Blacks?

What altered with the development of South African capitalism was that a white bourgeoisie arose from among the white settlers themselves, one that skimmed off colonial-type superprofits and enjoyed a rapid accumulation of capital. Other capitalists moved to South Africa from Europe, settled down more or less permanently, loosened their ties to their country of origin, and became incorporated into the South African bourgeoisie. Over a period of time, and within the established framework of white supremacy, it appropriated the colonial responsibilities and role from the British (in continued partnership with London and the other major imperialist powers, of course). Thus, in South Africa we now have a situation in which the colonizers and the subject peoples are within the same borders. This is one of the reasons for the extreme degree of segregation and the total disenfranchisement of the Black population. After all, a colonial power can hardly allow the colonized masses to have a say in its government!

I think that the comrades are perhaps using a too rigid and narrow definition of colonialism and believe that the term applies only in cases like that between Britain and India, where the colonialists maintained their base in their home countries. It was just such narrow conceptions that Maxime Rodinson argued against in his book, Israel: A Colonial-Settler State?: "There is no such thing as colonialism as such. What there is is a series of social phenomena in which numerous analogies with one another can be found, but also infinite nuances, and which have come to be referred to with labels." He quoted a useful definition by René Maunier, a French sociologist who studied colonialism ex-

tensively, that I think captures the gist of it, while leaving the specific form open: "One can speak of colonization when there is, and by the very fact that there is, occupation with domination...."

As a result of South Africa's extensive industrialization and the relatively limited white immigration, Blacks have become proletarianized to a high degree. Thus the Black masses are now both the colonial subjects and, at the same time, the bulk of the colonial power's industrial and agricultural workforce. This is what makes South African society unique--and so explosive.

The class oppression of Blacks does not somehow subsume or reduce the impact of colonial (national) oppression. It has heightened it. The very fact that the colonizers are resident in South Africa further restricts the concessions that Blacks can win from the regime (within the existing framework), since the immediate and basic interests of the white capitalists would be directly threatened. The white colonial bourgeoisie has little option but to try to maintain its position through direct--and exclusive--control of the state. So the disabilities that Blacks face today under a "modern capitalist" regime still resemble those of peoples in other colonies. Firstly, and most importantly, they have not won their political independence. In fact, their remaining political rights are being progressively reduced to the zero point. Blacks are still alienated from the vast bulk of their land. They receive ultralow wages, not just because they are workers, but because they are workers of an oppressed and subjugated people.

It is precisely because of the dual character of Black oppression in South Africa that the coming revolution must be a combined one. It must lead to the overthrow of the capitalist system and to the attainment of national liberation by Blacks, that is, to their independence from white colonial rule.

I am glad that comrade Cunvin at least acknowledges that he differs with Trotsky on this question, when Trotsky wrote in 1935, "From the point of view of the Black majority, South Africa is a slave colony." Cunvin ascribes this position to Trotsky's admitted unfamiliarity with South Africa and to the misleading information and analyses contained in the Workers Party theses to which he was replying. Though the theses certainly underplay the proletarianization of the Black population (significant even at that time), that does not invalidate Trotsky's use of the term "colony."

The South African Communist Party's use of the "theory of internal colonialism" is no reason for us, in some knee-jerk reaction, to reject the characterization of the South African state as colonialist. The Stalinists use the theory as part of their theoretical justification for a two-stage revolution in South Africa, with the first being a "national democratic revolution to destroy white domination," followed in the nebulous future by a promised socialist revolution. They do the same

thing in every other capitalist country in the world, stressing it especially in the colonial and semicolonial countries. We respond by pointing out the real nature of the so-called "national democratic revolution" as a cover for continued capitalist rule and for class-collaboration with the "national" bourgeoisie (the "liberal" white bourgeoisie in South Africa?). We point out that, in the age of imperialism, democratic and national emancipation can only be brought to completion by the overthrow of the capitalist class, the establishment of a workers state, and the carrying through of a socialist revolution. That is, we explain the theory of the permanent revolution. This approach has not led us to scrap the characterization of colonialism where it applies in other countries. Our call for a combined class and national revolution in South Africa does not mean that we should scrap it there.

A few, more minor points:

Cunvin states "that there is not and never has been an African peasantry in the usual sense of the term." While largely true, this is an exaggeration. In some areas, especially in the Eastern Cape, small African peasant communities arose in the middle of the nineteenth century, taking advantage of the new trading opportunities to raise produce for the market, as well as for their own use. These communities were then consciously destroyed by the regime to cut off any alternative source of income for Africans besides paid employment. On this, see "The Emergence and Decline of a South African Peasantry," By Colin Bundy in the October 1972 African Affairs, and "The Growth of Peasant Communities," By Monica Wilson in volume two of the Oxford History of South Africa. Also, in some of the Bantustans, the regime is today trying to foster the emergence of a small African peasant layer, that exists above the subsistence level, to serve as an internal social base for formations like Matanzima's Transkei National Independence Party. This is not an independent peasantry, however, but exists almost entirely on the largesse of the regime.

But the lack of a real independent peasantry should not lead us to minimize the extreme importance of the land question. Precisely because most of those in the reserves live below subsistence, on only a few acres of land if any at all, their hunger for land (and cattle) is acute. Also, we must remember that many migrant workers are in a socially transitional stage and still have a partial peasant consciousness. Demands for agrarian reform can have a big impact and its important not to brush the agrarian question aside.

Cunvin also states, "South African capitalism set out, from its very beginning, to completely destroy the tribal basis of African society." I doubt that all sectors of the capitalist class consciously set out to destroy tribal society completely. Some appear to have favored retaining portions of it to help subsidize Black subsistence and thus make even lower wages possible for the migrant workers. But the destruction of tribalism has certainly been the end result of South Africa's development

into an industrialized capitalist country. Perhaps in this context it would be useful to explain the function of the Bantustan system and the reasons for the regime's retention, and even glorification, of the outward trappings of tribal authority: the introduction of elements of indirect rule, the entrenchment of the migratory labor system, the divide-and-rule strategy, and the justification for whittling away African rights in "white" South Africa.

There are a few other points that would be interesting to take up, but that I don't have time to get into now. But I'll just throw them into the pot anyway. Since some social differences still exist among Xhosas, Zulus, Sothos, etc., and among Africans, Coloureds, and Indians, it would be useful to discuss the importance of achieving unity among the oppressed peoples, and on what basis. This also brings up the question of their right to self-determination, not only as part of their struggle for political independence (i.e., Black rule) in the country as a whole, but also any particular national, language, or cultural rights that the various peoples may want to exercise in the future. Given the growing social and political ties among Zulus, Xhosas, and other African peoples, I don't think this will become a key question, but I think it is important to leave its solution open, at least to show how revolutionary Marxists approach the question in contrast to the "tribal nationalists" like Matanzima and Buthelezi, and to the caricature of national self-determination put forward by the regime itself through its Bantustan program.

Very little, if anything, is said in the discussion pieces about the role of British, American, French, and other foreign capital in buttressing the South African economy and state. Nor is much said about the development of the Black Consciousness movement and the Soweto rebellions, what their significance is, what questions they raise, and so on. Also, I think it's important to develop the point about the revolutionary party a bit more, its relationship to the national liberation struggle and to the various nationalist and/or workers organizations that have arisen or may arise in the future, its social composition, etc. Likewise, there is the question of the relationship of the South African revolution to the rest of Africa and the world, but especially in the southern African context (the concept of a federation of Black socialist republics).

I think I'll end it here, and hope that this can be the beginning of a fruitful exchange. Feel free to show this letter to the other comrades involved in the discussions. I would also welcome their comments and criticisms.

All the best,

Ernest Harsch

Ernest Harsch

P.S.--We do have the Torch, but it is for only about two years, from 1961 until it closed down in 1963. Since it was a weekly, the costs of copying all of them for you would be beyond our means. Perhaps you could convince some library there to foot the bill? Or if there are specific topics you're interested in, I could just make copies of the articles dealing with those.

--EH