

UNITY AND DISUNITY IN WHITE POLITICS

by Sol Dubula

The peoples of South Africa face a common enemy whose destruction is a precondition for permanent revolutionary advance in the whole of the area, and perhaps in much of the rest of our continent. To understand this enemy, to define his main characteristics, to uncover the source of his strength and weakness, to grasp and take advantage of contradictions within his ranks: these are amongst the starting points of revolutionary strategy. One of the great strengths of organisations like FRELIMO and MPLA is that at each stage of their history they paused and defined the nature of the enemy, the nature of the liberation forces, and reexamined the changes that were taking place from time to time in both camps.

How then do we in the South African liberation movement assess and analyse the character of the South African ruling class? For purposes of popular mobilisation, both internally and externally, we emphasise its more visible characteristics and qualities; its tyranny, the way it dehumanises the dominated people, the atrocities daily

carried out by its instruments of terror and force, and so on. Externally we expose its role as a gendarme of western imperialism together with whom it conspires not only to maintain its power in South Africa, but also to reverse the gains of the African revolution, and in particular to prevent its full advance in Namibia and Zimbabwe. And the broad, simple picture which emerges is one with which the whole world is familiar. It is a picture of the only state in the world which has openly institutionalised race domination at every level of life; social, cultural, political, economic, sporting, and so on. This is the black and white picture in which an indigenous group of settler origin participates in varying ways in the exploitation and oppression of the black majority. In general it stands together as a group to protect its privileges and has developed a whole body of racist ideology to rationalise and support its hegemony.

But it is not enough to observe the reality of race oppression. We also have to understand what is behind it. And unless we understand and explain other and, perhaps, more fundamental realities, we will be unable to understand or explain a number of vital questions. And, what is even more important for us as a liberation movement, we will not be able to reach the correct strategy for effective struggle.

To look at our enemy only as an undifferentiated bloc is as misleading as to look at the liberation forces in the same way. We must therefore go beyond the simple black and white picture and only come back to it when we have uncovered the essence of what is going on.

This other reality plays an important part in the day to day politics of our situation. We know, for example, that as between South Africa and its imperialist allies there is both unity and diversity. We know that their fundamental aims in southern Africa are the same. Yet we have recently witnessed some tensions and contradictions between South Africa and some of its allies. In recent months, for example, Radio South Africa has delivered some quite sharp attacks on the USA and the Carter administration combined with allegations that they are playing into the hands of the Soviet Union and Cuba.

Secondly, we talk of "white oppression" and "white exploitation". But we know that white society itself is a class society. We know there is a white capitalist class, a white working class, a white middle class and a white farming class. And, each of these groups does not benefit

from racism in the same way nor does it carry out the same role within the system of exploitation and oppression. So that is another reality that we have got to explain.

A third reality which we have got to understand is that the black oppressed are also not an undifferentiated mass. Within the black community there are class divisions, and we will not be able to understand the different tendencies within the national liberation movement, nor can we work out a correct perspective and strategy for revolutionary liberation, without taking these class divisions within the black community into account.

Central Problem

The problem which is most central in the South African revolution is the *relationship* between national and class struggle in South Africa.

The word "relationship" must be emphasised because too often the wrong question is put. The wrong question is: is it a class struggle or is it a national struggle? As soon as the question is put in this way, the seeds of a wrong answer are sown, because the question separates two things which cannot be separated. Class and national struggle in South Africa are not two alternatives: they are bound together in a dialectical unity. A South African class struggle which is divorced from the national struggle can only be fought out in universities, classrooms, not in the actual situation. To talk of the South African class struggle divorced from the national struggle is as academic and misleading as to talk of national struggle divorced from the class basis of racist oppression.

For our liberation movement there can be no true national liberation without social emancipation, and there can be no social emancipation without national liberation. This theoretical approach is of great relevance and one cannot understand "white politics" without grasping its essence. It is the specific relationship between class and race which explains fundamentally why the white community in South Africa is both united and divided.

The first question we have to ask ourselves is: what unites the dominant group? Not all members of the white community are members of the ruling class in its strict classical meaning. Looking at South African society as a whole, it is clear that capitalists, workers, middle strata are to be found amongst all races — black and white.

But in each category there is a clear dividing line based on colour. So, however privileged the black middle class is in relation to the black working class, it is less privileged than the white middle class. Again, a black worker is exploited not only as a worker, but also as a black worker. Legal and social practice decrees that it is colour and colour alone which determines the black worker's political, economic and social position vis-a-vis the white worker. Conversely the economic, political and social privileges of the white workers are basically secured by the racist superstructure. What unites the whites as a community is that all classes and groups amongst the whites — from capitalists down to labourers — benefit in some way from white national domination.

But they do not benefit in the same way. They do not participate in the same way or to the same extent in the fruits of national domination. And this is one of the sources of division between classes in the white community (and sometimes between fragments of the same class) which has been more or less sharp at different points of history. To illustrate this point it is necessary to refer briefly to the white working class, mining and finance capital, and the historical divisions between the two main white linguistic groups — the Afrikaners and the English.

The white working class has, broadly speaking, gone through three stages of development.

In the first phase it showed quite a high level of class militancy. Its class postures were not yet so deeply distorted by the race factor. It had a monopoly of skills and jobs in the towns. The Africans had not yet become proletarianised on any scale. During this phase the white working class engaged in quite a few militant economic struggles against the mining bosses. In fact it was from within its ranks that the beginnings of a socialist movement emerged in South Africa. Broadly speaking this phase of the white working class covered the first two decades of our century.

The 1922 Strike

The second phase dates generally from the end of the first world war. As a result of the economic development which took place after the war, there was an influx into the towns of a black work force, the beginnings of a sizable black urban proletariat. The immediate

cause of the so-called "1922 Revolt" — the general strike of the white miners — was the attempt by the mine-owners to remove aspects of the colour bar on the mines. It did so, of course, for its own purposes, to safeguard and increase profits. Because this was a period when the white working class had one foot in the past and the other in the future, some interesting and contradictory incidents were connected with that strike. The white workers took over a portion of Johannesburg and raised the red flag on the Johannesburg City Hall. They did all this under the banner of 'Workers of the World Unite and Fight for a White South Africa'. With arms in hand they fought not only the regime's military forces but also launched attacks of terrorism against black workers.

These dramatic events foreshadowed the beginning of the retreat of the white working class movement. They were really fighting for what they eventually achieved in 1926, for their privileges as white workers to be legally entrenched by the State. Up to 1926 there was no legal colour bar on the mines. The white monopoly of skilled work was based on an agreement between the bosses and white trade unions which did not have the force of law. The 1926 Mines and Work Act was thus the beginning of the institutionalised compromise between the white working class and the white ruling class. It was during this phase that the white working class was progressively coopted in support of the white ruling class — politically, economically and in every other way.

In the third and more recent period there are once again signs of stress between the white ruling class and the white working class because the traditional privileged position of the white working class is beginning to constitute an obstacle in the way of full economic development in some sectors of the economy. There is a shortage of skilled and semi-skilled labour in South Africa which cannot be filled from the ranks of the white working class. The ruling class (not all of it, but part of it) is anxious to water down the colour-bar in industry in the interests of profit and in the interests of expansion. The white organised working class sees this as a threat once again to its privileged status in the economy. This explains some of the renewed tension which we have seen in the more recent period. It also helps to explain the seemingly contradictory phenomenon that the more "liberal"-sounding approaches towards African job elevation, colour

bar in industry and trade union rights seem to be pressed by some of the leading monopolists, against hard-line opposition from important sectors of the white trade union movement.

There is, for example, a recent article by Dr. Z. de Beer, a spokesman for the Anglo-American Corporation, in which he argues that Africans should be allowed to have legal non-colour bar trade unions. In a recent report, the chairman of the Anglo-American Corporation, Mr. Harry Oppenheimer, enunciated the same view, which is also shared by some leaders of Afrikaner capitalism.

The second example relates to mining and farming within the white group. Here too there are a number of stages which characterise some of the tensions between the two interest groups.

The early period was characterised by a struggle for control of the whole of South Africa. British imperialism fought for control of economic resources: land, mineral and labour. As we know, this struggle for control of the resources led to wars not only against the indigenous tribes, but also between the settlers, including the Anglo-Boer War. Some of the settlers, mainly of Dutch and German origin, had expanded into the interior and had created various short-lived independent farming republics.

Labour Resources

The second stage was the struggle for control of labour resources between the various sectors of the South African ruling class. Important conflicts developed between the basic interest of the mining and farming groups. This conflict centered around the question of access to the labour of the dispossessed African tribes. The Africans were pressed into service by varying methods of forced and semi-forced contract labour.

The conflict was also closely connected with another growing contradiction between foreign and national capital. Agriculture was becoming transformed into capitalist farming and was mainly in the hands of National Capital, whereas mining capital was, by and large, foreign.

Later on we saw a more pronounced integration of mining capital with farming capital. The emergence of finance capital acted as a cementing influence. Mining and industrial groups were interested in producing cheap food in order to lower the value of labour power

and also became involved in farming activity. The result was that the early sharpness in the conflict between the competing interests of mining and farming capital tended to become less acute. But in the ideological sphere the legacy of the division continued to be of importance, particularly since mining capital was traditionally English and the bulk of the white farmers were Afrikaners.

We must also mention the conflict between mining interests and the interests of the emerging secondary industrialists. The industrialists, for obvious reasons, were interested in an urbanised, permanent labour force which the entrenched system of migrant labour was impeding. Therefore, in the political spectrum of the twenties and thirties, one witnessed a certain amount of infighting between mining capital (supported by farming on this question) and the spokesmen of the emerging urban capitalist class. The latter appeared more reformist, more liberal, sometimes pressing for the easing of the pass laws, for creating better conditions for blacks in the urban areas, and so on.

The historical roots of the divisions between the Afrikaans and English sectors of the white community go back to the struggle in the early days for political control over land and other economic resources which led to war and conflict. In the ideological sphere this retains a momentum of its own. Tensions of this sort remain long after the disappearance of the basic historical causes and the bitterness and passions of the past continue to play a part and influence the way in which people react in the political sphere.

The additional divisive factor in the modern period is connected with economic competition between the English-speaking section and the Afrikaans-speaking section. The Afrikaner aspirant capitalist had historically been excluded from the mining industry and had his main economic roots in the countryside and in national rather than imperial capital. This fact, coupled with other historic conflicts, was the fuel for the kind of national movement which emerged amongst the Afrikaners, led by the small Afrikaner bourgeoisie and middle class, which found itself excluded from the real heights of economic power.

In this struggle the question of Afrikaans culture and Afrikaans language rights played an important part.

The evolution of modern Afrikaner nationalism reflected the

changes that were taking place in the social-economic structure. In its early phase it expressed itself in a democratic type of anti-imperialism and even anti-capitalism. For example, when Dr. Malan spoke about the Bolshevik revolution in the early twenties, he called Lenin "the new Christ". Later this very same movement looked to Hitler fascism in order to find some support for the fulfilment of economic and nationalist aspirations. 1948 gave the Afrikaner the possibility (which we have seen operating in other parts of Africa) of using political office to fulfil the aims of an aspirant bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie.

As a result of the deliberate steps that were taken by the new Afrikaner-dominated regime, the Afrikaners (or rather the upper and middle classes) achieved full participation in the ownership and control of the means of production. They have now become entrenched at all levels; mining, banking, heavy and secondary industry, capitalist farming and so on.

The Afrikaner Share

Professor Jan Sadie, of the Stellenbosch Bureau for Economic Research, puts the Afrikaner share in the private sector of the South African economy in 1948-49 at 9.6 per cent, excluding agriculture. By 1975 he estimates this stake had increased to 19.6 per cent. The chairman of ISCOR, Dr Tom Muller, puts it even higher, at 25 per cent. In agriculture the Afrikaner's share is 80 per cent.

Nor should the Afrikaner's control of the state and the public corporations (the railways, ISCOR, ESCOM, SASOL etc.) be ignored. There are today nearly 1,500,000 people employed by the central government, public corporations, provincial administrations, local authorities and other statutory bodies — in 1970 there were only 675,694. More than 60 per cent of Afrikaners are, directly or indirectly, financially dependent on the Government and Afrikaner institutions. Not surprisingly, the journalist Hans Strydom commented in the *Sunday Times* (February 13, 1977) that "the Afrikaner, by and large, is therefore in financial bondage to his own creation — the Nationalist Government" The Afrikaner ruling group is also in control of enormous assets running into billions of rands.

Nevertheless, the non-Afrikaner still dominates in the private sphere. Of the top 25 industrial companies listed on the

Johannesburg stock exchange only six are Afrikaner-controlled. The mining industry is still largely in the hands of non-Afrikaners, despite the growth of the General Mining Corporation. The take-over of the Gretermans chain by the Federale group in August 1978 represents the first large-scale entry of Afrikaner capital into the sphere of mass retail marketing.

These developments explain the two contradictory features of present white politics in South Africa — both the “toenadering” between the English and Afrikaner sections at political, cultural and economic levels; and the continuation of friction and bitterness and tribal exclusivity. The division between “verligtes” and “verkrampes”, the quarrel about future development between the so-called liberals and the hardliners, is evident in both the Afrikaner and English communities. The often-stated view that English-speaking whites are tending to vote for the Nationalist Party in increasing numbers has no statistical basis. The Nationalist proportion of the vote in the last election, though larger than ever before, more or less corresponds to the Afrikaner proportion of the total population. The increased electoral backing for the regime is probably due, not so much to the increased English vote as to the return to the fold of Afrikaners who previously voted United Party. Certainly, in his Cabinet appointments Vorster showed no desire to woo or placate the English voters. There was only one English-speaking Minister in his Cabinet, hardly a reflection of “white unity”.

This is why, from the point of view of the Black oppressed, the viciousness of modern apartheid (historically an ‘English’ invention) is personified by the so-called “Ama-Bunus”, the “Boers”. It is the Afrikaners who dominate the police force, the army and the repressive administrative machine. It is the Afrikaner who is seen to wield the truncheon of oppression. The Soweto revolt, for example, was triggered off by attempts to impose Afrikaans — the ‘language of the oppressor’ — as a medium of instruction in the Bantu Education schools.

It would, however, be wrong to succumb to the populist temptation to single out the ethnic Afrikaner as the main immediate enemy. The role of the Afrikaner railway worker or bricklayer is virtually the same as his English-speaking counterpart. The same could be said of the English-dominated Anglo-American Corp. and

the Afrikaans-dominated Federale-Mynbou.

☞ In any case, our struggle is not only against the state apparatus, which constitutes only one aspect of ruling class domination. Indeed, Marxism teaches that the State (and its institutions) does not stand above society as a mediating force; it is rather the instrument whereby the ruling class (basically the owners of the means of production) maintain their hegemony. Hence, if we concentrate too much on the ethnic composition of those who man the state apparatus we are in danger of weakening our fight against the real class basis of racist oppression.

☞ It is necessary to emphasise again that true national liberation (we are not yet talking of socialism), and the abolition of race discrimination cannot be won unless the racist monopoly over the means of production is ended and the people regain not only political power but also economic power. In the case of the latter there is very little basis for distinguishing between the two language sections.

☞ Nevertheless, there does exist a minority anti-racist lobby amongst the whites in South Africa. Amongst certain organised church groups there is a more liberal tendency in relation to human rights, human values, terror by the regime, torture of prisoners, education policy and so on. We have observed, too, that there exists a business lobby which expresses relatively progressive approaches on questions of African housing, African trade union rights, more effective avenues for black political expression. This tendency is also expressed by the Progressive Party, which draws its main material support from the Oppenheimer group. There also remains a certain amount of relative vitality in part of the English-speaking press; a certain outspokenness (which is of late becoming more inhibited) on aspects of the tyrannical system in force in South Africa.

☞ What explains these differences? How deep are they and what can we expect from them? I believe that they can only be understood against the background of the present crisis which faces the ruling class in South Africa. Lenin has pointed out that one of the elements which puts revolutionary change on the agenda is that the ruling class can no longer rule in the old way. I think it is clear that this element of the crisis is present in South Africa today. It is recognised by the regime, and its imperialist allies, the United States, Britain, France etc. The racist regime in South Africa, like the regime in

Zimbabwe, can no longer continue to rule in the old way.

This element of the crisis is related to the external and internal changes that have taken place particularly in the last five years; more particularly the victories in Mozambique and Angola, and the growing revolutionary upsurge in South Africa itself. Also, the economy has been hit by the same kind of crisis from which the imperialist west is suffering — inflation, monetary crisis — and is aggravated by special problems connected with the implementation of apartheid policies.

Everyone realises — from Botha to Oppenheimer to South Africa's imperialist allies — that they cannot go on in the same way. Therefore there is an urgent search for new solutions which will prevent the threatened revolutionary onslaught and which will keep the basic structure of capitalist exploitation intact . . .

When a ruling class is faced with this kind of situation, there is always room for ideological difference on how best to meet the crisis, how best to ensure that the basic structure is saved from a threatened onslaught both inside and outside the country. And we can observe the different ideological tendencies being expressed in all these divisions — the verligte-verkrampste, the Botha-Oppenheimer and so on.

For example, when Oppenheimer addressed the London Stock Exchange recently he put his position very clearly. He told his audience that in South Africa the white man has brought about positive and negative changes. The positive contribution has been private enterprise — capitalism — which has developed the country into one of the leading industrial nations of the world. The negative part has been racialism. He then went on to warn that the black people of South Africa see capitalism and racialism as being connected with one another. Unless South Africa is prepared to make retreats in the field of race relations, he went on, those who are acting to destroy it will at the same time destroy capitalism as well.

This is an example of the kind of debate which goes on within the ruling class. It is centred on the question of how far the ruling class can retreat in the area of race as the chief mechanism for black exploitation, without endangering the basic source of its economic and political supremacy.

There is another factor to take into account when assessing the

Oppenheimer tendency. Oppenheimer is not just a South African mining magnate and industrialist; he is a spokesman for important multi-national interests connected with Europe, USA, Latin America etc. He faces the same dilemma as his imperialist associates who make super-profits from the apartheid system but who cannot be seen to support the excesses of racism because their interests (political and economic) in other parts of the developing world could be undermined by the growing revulsion against the South African regime. Thus they cannot openly go along with a policy which will perhaps jeopardise their relationship with important areas of the underdeveloped world. This too explains some of the tensions and some of the contradictions and the way in which they are expressed, both within South Africa and between the regime and its external allies.

The Economic Hinterland

There is also the problem of the utilisation of the African market. South Africa is an exporting country. Its natural market hinterland (as it has been called) is in Africa. It has to export to survive and expand and there are also growing ambitions for neo-colonial expansion. Therefore, there is a tendency within certain sections of the ruling class to press for certain concessions within South Africa which will make South Africa more acceptable to the rest of independent Africa. This policy has not been completely unsuccessful.

Recent minor internal reforms in South Africa have provided the excuse for some leaders of African states to collaborate with the apartheid regime. But the export market does not immediately affect the different classes within the white community in the same way and there is room for difference on how far the regime should retreat in the field of petty apartheid, in the field of human rights and so on.

Nevertheless it is clear that the dominant tendency within the white community today is not difference and diversity; it is unity. The reason for this becomes apparent if we examine what has happened since 1948.

In 1948 the present regime won political control on a minority of white votes because the constituencies were heavily weighted in favour of the countryside. At every election since 1948 the

Nationalist Government has increased its support amongst all classes and amongst both sections of the white community — Afrikaans and English-speaking. In the last election on November 30th, 1977, the white parliamentary opposition completely disintegrated. Vorster received the biggest vote ever from the white electorate. In a parliament of 165 members the biggest opposition block which has emerged is the Progressive Federal Party which won 17 seats. Therefore the actual parliamentary constitutional struggle amongst the whites plays a smaller role today than ever before in modern history.

The racial-fed privileges of all white groups — the white capitalist class, the white working class, the white middle class — are threatened as never before by the new situation and by the new revolutionary forces which are emerging both inside and outside the country. This perhaps more than any other factor explains the breakdown of effective white opposition. The whites are fleeing more and more into the same laager. This is why it is correct to say that these contradictions and debates which we are witnessing are secondary contradictions at this moment. They do not, on their own, hold out the possibility of mobilising any significant class or group amongst the whites in support of our liberation aims.

In the "German Ideology", Karl Marx stated:

"... the separate individuals form a class insofar as they have to carry on a common battle against another class, otherwise they are on hostile terms with each other as competitors".

This remains true in relation to South Africa even though it is misleading to ignore the class divisions within the white community. But to pursue the analogy, it could be said that the separate classes within the white community have always been competitively hostile to one another except when they have been forced to carry on a common battle to entrench and defend those structures which, in different ways, serve the common interests of all classes within the dominant race group.

In other words, the intensity and changing character of the contradictions within white politics can only be understood by examining the place which each class (and in the case of the capitalist class, each important segment of capital) occupies in the relations of production as a whole. But we must emphasise once

again that these contradictions have always been (and remain today) within the framework which relies on national domination which, in some way, has benefited every class and group within the white community. The degree to which the different classes and segments of classes within the white community are on hostile terms with each other as competitors thus depends largely on the actual and potential threat from the mainly black revolutionary opposition. And this explains why today the white community has closed ranks as never before.

This does not mean that those differences which continue to express themselves should be ignored. Differences in the enemy camp, whatever their origin, decrease its capacity to withstand revolutionary pressures. But perhaps what is more important is to avoid looking at the situation statically and to try to project into the future. The threat of revolutionary upsurge which has now stimulated greater unity within the white community can, when it reaches a higher point, lead to a much more significant fragmentation.

At the moment the white community as a whole believes that it can maintain its monopoly of economic and political privileges if it stands united. When the pressures of the revolutionary movement demonstrate that this cannot be, it is likely that the very same factors which have recently been the source of greater unity will become the source of a much bigger division and fragmentation than we have previously experienced.

Despite the tragic fact that the white community remains a relatively solid block against the liberation forces, our movement does not see the conflict in racist terms. It has always welcomed white revolutionaries within its ranks and many of them have given their lives to our cause. It is not our aim to replace the white monopoly of privilege with a black monopoly, nor to replace the small group of white exploiters with a small group of black exploiters. Such a victory will not achieve the aims of true liberation.

Also, no political strategy can be called serious unless it is prepared at all stages to take advantage of all division in the opposite camp, to gather around itself all possible allies who, for whatever reason, are prepared to reinforce the movement's fundamental aim at every given stage of the struggle. As long as the dominant force within the

movement remains healthy and revolutionary there can be no fear of finding allies, or of seeking principled collaboration. We must continue to do what we can to make whites feel that there is a place for them in a People's South Africa. Therefore, in the interests of effective revolutionary struggle as well as in the interests of correct revolutionary strategy, there is no doubt that our movement never really has been, and certainly is not today, based on racist ideology.

