

★ 50 ISSUES OF A REVOLUTIONARY PAPER

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'But this will not be easy' it continued. 'South Africa has a highly militant and organised black working class, which has again and again shown that it will fight for better wages, working conditions and living standards'.

The militancy and organisation of the working class, however, was threatened by the argument for a partnership with the bosses, that was taking hold in the union movement, the social contract.

In 1991 The Socialist pointed to the lesson of Australia when the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) made one of the earliest productivity agreements: 'The idea of the accord is that labour, capital and the state all have the same 'national' interest. But workers have been made to tighten their belts and pay for the mistakes the bosses have made'.

The Socialist argued for 'revolutionary abstentionism' - that workers should take no responsibility for making the system work or bailing out the bosses.

By 1994, the organisation around The Socialist had grown. The Socialist had been like a stick for a young plant to lean on.

The Socialist's strength in arguments about South Africa came from its broader vision. It never confined itself to what was happening in front of our eyes.

World

International news built a picture of the state of the working class in the whole world.

Articles on the Paris Commune and the Russian Revolution outlined the principles of the kind of society we were fighting for, and how it could be won. We looked at what happened when workers' parties tried to follow a parliamentary road to socialism, like in Chile 1973.

We rebuilt a marxist understanding of the roots of racism, women's and gay oppression, and explained imperialism, state capitalism, what kind of party we need for socialism, or the basics of marxist economics.

The ideas of giants of marxism like Luxemburg, Trotsky, and Lenin - permanent revolution, understanding reformism, the united front, marxism and nationalism and the revolutionary party - appeared often.

These were bread and butter for revolutionaries wanting to understand South Africa in the 1990s.

Routine sales of The Socialist meant routinely meeting and talking to people who did not agree with everything we said but who were political and wanted change.

This was a time of building patiently, in ones and twos, around many big ideas.

The Socialist helped us to swim against the stream without climbing out of the river. Its arguments about ANC were often unpopular, but its hard opposition to racism and its commitment to fight for change meant that we were able to keep a link with militants in the alliance.

The paper understood that a victory for the ANC would be a defeat for racism, and a boost for workers confidence. So it argued, 'Vote ANC but build the socialist alternative'.

After the elections The Socialist continued its argument for revolution against capitalism, with the headline: 'Apartheid is dead, but there's more to win - keep up the workers' struggle'.

The paper criticised the new government's call for workers to hold back their expectations, with the headline 'We can't wait - let's keep up the fight'.

The period after the elections presented a golden opportunity to build a socialist alternative. The working class was confident and fighting-fit. With apartheid defeated, the idea of socialism did not seem so impossible.

In this situation socialists could link up with a whole new layer of people by linking up with their will to fight.

The Socialist was replaced by Socialist Worker, in October 1994.

The new government was already retreating on the RDP - 'where is the money to come from?'

The first Socialist Worker answered, 'Struggle is the way - make the bosses pay - for health, housing, education, jobs and a living wage'. Inside it asked, 'Why won't ANC make the rich pay?'

Socialist Worker still carried articles like 'Understanding unions' or 'The Russian Revolution', articles about the marxist tradition.

But much more of the paper was now devoted to using marxism for agitation - above all, encouraging people to fight capitalism.

To this end it reported on strikes and struggles that the organisation was involving itself in, like the campaign for rent control and support for several strikes. It published appeals for funds and resolutions.

It showed why workers could not rely on ANC by exposing how it was backtracking on the RDP. It exposed the reality and injustices of the bosses' brutal system.

Socialist Worker soon became a 4 page paper, published every two weeks. This fitted the new rhythm of an organisation that was now recruiting by tens and twenties, on the streets not just with ideas but also with action.

Socialist Worker became a paper of pickets, marches and demonstrations. Routine paper selling became a springboard for activity, collecting money for strikers or petitions against rent control.

Dropping off the paper at people's homes became a way of keeping a link with a wide layer of people. Regular readers could be asked to collect money or petitions amongst their own friends and comrades. A core of members could draw a wider layer into activity through the Socialist Worker.

This period showed the possibility for socialist organisation to grow - and it showed how the revolutionary paper could be used as an organiser. It gave a taste of how a revolutionary paper could become the centre of a network of activity.

Short

But it was a short-lived period. Workers' confidence did not last. No big organisation supported their struggles. Even the union leadership wavered, because of its alliance with ANC.

When the ANC did not deliver what it had promised, not every worker automatically drew revolutionary conclusions. Some became demoralised, others accepted the government's appeals for patience.

The Socialist Workers were much too small to make a difference. Socialist Worker's arguments were strong, but they could not reach the working class without enough members to sell the paper to them.

Those who were attracted to the organisation in the euphoria after the elections, tended to drift away as the confidence drained.

To stay firm in this climate a socialist needed the foundation of broad politics that built The Socialist. Socialist Worker today must once again be a sharp propaganda tool.

The class struggle is not dead, although it is not as high as it was after the elections. Workers and students are still pushed to fight by attacks on wages and work conditions, and subsidy cuts.

Inside and outside this fight another struggle is raging. That is an ideological struggle, a struggle of ideas, as people seek to understand why ANC betrays promises and what to do about it.

Socialist Worker today is a paper that wants to jump into these arguments with a revolutionary way forward. It wants to equip socialists with solid marxist politics, and to link up those who agree that workers' revolution is the only solution.

It remains a paper that seeks to expose the truth about a society divided into classes, to argue for the workers' power solution, and to build a revolutionary organisation.

South Africa's first revolutionary paper

The International

IN SELLING Socialist Worker, members of the Socialist Workers Organisation are continuing a tradition which has always been the backbone of revolutionary socialist groups, all over the world.

The Bolshevik party, which was to lead the October revolution in Russia in 1917, built up their newspaper over many years, starting with Iskra (Spark) which later became Pravda (Truth).

Bolshevik activists used the paper to spread ideas which confronted the rulers of the day.

The paper also acted as the cement which kept the Bolsheviks together through thick and thin.

Lenin compared the revolutionary paper to the scaffolding used to build a building: 'It marks the contours of the structure and facilitates communication between builders, permitting them to distribute the work and to view the common results of their organised labour'.

IN SOUTH Africa, one of the first newspapers to make such an attempt was the weekly The International. Its first issue came out in late 1915.

It was produced by socialists who were to soon form the International Socialist League (ISL). The organisation was made up of activists who were in the white South African Labour Party before. They had resigned from it, or had been expelled from it, because the Labour Party would not accept their anti-war views.

Led by Sidney Bunting and David Ivon Jones, the ISL immediately identified itself with the left wing anti-war socialists in Europe around Karl Liebknecht, Rosa Luxemburg, Lenin and Trotsky.

Their position was uncompromising opposition to the war.

This placed them among the handful of international socialists who did not bow to nationalist chauvinism with the outbreak of the First World War. Articles outlining the relationship between war and capitalist profits appeared regularly in the pages of The International.

The paper exposed the brutality of war, as well as the hypocrisy of the South African government, which praised black soldiers at the battle front but gave them no rights back home.

It is also in the pages of The International that the first news of the February revolution in Russia reached South Africa. The headline for the 23 March issue in 1917 read '170 Million Recruits'.

Ivon Jones wrote of the February revolution 'This is a bourgeois revolution, but arriving when the night of capitalism is far spent. It cannot be a mere repetition of previous revolutions. It partakes infinitely more of a victory for the proletariat as well as for the industrial capitalist.'

By June the paper had determined the true extent of events abroad: 'The workers of Russia organised to overthrow the Tzar, and then quietly remained in the saddle to abolish capitalism.' Reports of celebrations all around the country came flooding into the paper.

The International was the first paper in the country to argue that the black working class, was a product of capitalism and therefore had a role to play in a South African revolution.

The December 1917 issue of the paper argued 'If all those who labour cannot share in the emancipation of labour, none can be emancipated'. This basic position was



SYDNEY BUNTING, (the man carrying papers) argued for communists to build amongst black workers

shared by all in the group.

But the arguments about the black working class were directed at the paper's predominantly white audience. In its early days the paper and its activists found it extremely difficult to link up with black workers.

Still, there was heated debate in the pages of the newspaper about what role black workers should play.

The organisation was made up of committed anti-racists. All agreed on the need to build black workers organisation and on the need to build unity amongst black and white workers. However differences emerged as to where efforts should be focused.

Ivon Jones argued that the white working class, which at that time had a monopoly on all skilled jobs in the country, could be the 'engine of revolution'. He felt that they were more politically experienced and educated than their black counterparts.

This implied that black workers would have to look to white workers to lead their liberation.

Sydney Bunting took a different view. He argued in 1919, after witnessing continued racism from white workers, that black workers would be the agents of revolution in South Africa.

He said of racist white workers, 'Well then, go on in your ruts: let your Native fellow workers... be more progressive than you, and if you will not help their advance, let them advance in spite of you'.

He said of black workers that their qualities of 'mass solidarity, their restraint, and law-abidingness under trying conditions, their communal spirit, their freedom from property instinct... fit them for the great task of their own emancipation, and with them that of the white working class from the trammels of wage slavery'.

FOR BUNTING the main emphasis, then, had to be the organisation amongst black workers.

The 1922 strikes on the Rand were a test of these positions. On one hand it seemed to prove Jones correct as far as the militancy of the white workers were concerned. On the other hand the strikers began to pose their demands in racial terms. The strike was against the reduction of white wages, and for the retention of the colour bar.

The socialists - now called the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) - supported the strike as a demonstration of worker militancy not seen since 1913, while appeal for the strike to be limited to the

wage demand.

But their appeals against racism were in vain, because they were only verbal. They had done no work to win practical unity of white workers with black workers.

Only such practical unity could have won the argument with at least sections of white workers that class unity required a rejection of racism.

When the Pact government was voted in in 1924, with the support of the CPSA, the question of looking to the black working class became easier to win with the people around Bunting. The Pact government, an alliance of the South African Labour Party and the Nationalist Party, extended the colour bar and bent to the interests of Afrikaner nationalists.

Enlisting the authority of the Communist International, The International printed Trotsky's address to Congress on the black question in the United States:

'A Communist Party confining itself to mere platonic [that is, only in ideas] resolutions, without exerting its utmost energies towards winning the largest possible number of enlightened Negroes for its ideas within the shortest possible time, would not be worthy of the name Communist Party'.

At the organisation's December 1924 congress, a new leadership chaired by Bunting was elected with the mandate to begin practical work among the black working class.

Many who did not agree resigned, but the organisation was placed irreversibly on a new course towards establishing a revolutionary organisation rooted in the black working class.

The paper was renamed The South African Worker and began to include articles in African languages. By 1928, party membership stood at 1700, 1600 of whom were black.

This important move was later distorted by the Comintern, under Stalin's influence. Its Black Republics Thesis insisted on a strategy which meant the black working class placing their hopes for change in the black middle classes. Bunting was expelled from the organisation in 1931.

The pages of The International united around it principled socialists whose commitment to the classical Marxist tradition and their willingness to learn from events, made honest appraisals possible. This tradition is still defended today in the pages of Socialist Worker.*

■ BY ANGIE HAMMOND