Political Strategies and the State: Some Historical Observations

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Introduction

In the study of social movements of the oppressed, there often exists for the Left historian and political actor an inclination to avoid thorny questions of strategy and tactics. Definite strategic decisions may be naturalised as the only possible response to a particular situation or set of ‘structural predeterminations’. They may be idealised as rational modes of action which make sense in the context of their application. They may be ignored in favour of a celebration of the struggle or a denunciation of its suppression. In order to explain the movement’s successes and failures, appeal may be made to objective factors, like the size of the working class, the mode of its employment or the strength of the state’s repressive apparatus. Alternatively, purely subjective factors may be invoked, like the heroism and commitment of the oppressed and the brutality of the rulers.

Such considerations may all be true and illuminating, but they are not sufficient to explain the movement’s progression. Left out of the picture is the conscious, rational side of social movements: their capacity to make programmatic and operational choices, to learn from the past and from theory, to combine their own experience with the experience of other movements abroad, to question themselves through debate and criticism and to rebuild afresh. There are undoubtedly times when a movement’s strategic capacities are crucial to its success or failure. To ignore this dimension is to present a diminished image of the movement’s character. It omits the self-consciousness with which a movement channels the anger and misery of the people, combats their demoralisation, offers a political understanding, programme and solution (which may be in competition with those of others), fights for a particular kind of leadership and direction, and organises a definite form of internal democracy.

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One of the most thoughtful discussions of strategic issues to come out of the South African liberation movement was that written by Slovo. Looking back on the experience of the 1950s, Slovo addressed the defeats suffered by the Congress movement:

Measured by the yardstick of immediate achievements, each of these campaigns failed. The laws selected as the targets of the Defiance Campaign remained on the statute book... Sophiatown was bulldozed to the ground... Anti-pass actions did not prevent the more intense application of pass laws... Peasant resistance was crushed... Strikes did not loosen the hold of white supremacy.\(^1\)

Slovo proceeded, however, to place inverted commas around the concept of ‘failure’ and to dissolve the search for a specific historical explanation amid a general discourse about the inevitability of failure in the revolutionary process:

‘Failure’ measured in such narrow terms has been the universal experience of every revolutionary movement. Until the moment of successful revolutionary take-over, each individual act of resistance usually fails and is often crushed... In this sense, ‘failure’ is the constant companion of all political endeavour by a dominated group which is not yet capable of winning power... It is often only through the experience of these so-called failures that the masses begin to understand the need for conquering state power and thus for revolution.\(^2\)

It is certainly true that no social movement, however wise its leaders or brave its members, can guarantee an unbroken string of victories. It is also true that some defeats, defined narrowly, have served as catalysts for the deepening and widening of revolt. Nevertheless, the history of revolutionary movements has not only been littered with defeats prior to a final victory. Some defeats have had damaging long term consequences, leading to widespread feelings of demoralisation or to the corruption of revolutionary organisations. Conversely, the growth of many revolutionary movements has been built on a foundation of small gains, partial state reforms, successful economic strikes and the like. Revolutionary consciousness has not only grown out of the experience of frustrated reform but also from the confidence, knowledge, rights and material benefits won through what Gramsci loosely called ‘the war of position’.\(^3\)

Whatever other lessons are drawn from the rich history of modern revolutionary movements, the problem of failure — whether conceived narrowly in terms of the seizure of power or broadly in terms of the realisation of revolutionary ideals — has loomed large. In explaining failure, it is as mistaken, in our view, to exclude the strategic direction taken by a movement, as it is to hold it entirely responsible, as if the ‘correct strategy’ would always guarantee success. In assessing the history of social movements, committed writers may overlook or deny past failures; they may translate them ideally into success; or they may normalise them as stepping stones on the road to revolution. An ‘optimism of the will’ feeds this approach which undoubtedly serves important political functions, but it also substitutes for the hard, critical thought which Gramsci termed ‘the pessimism of the intellect’. We become

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reconciled to the idea that the movement’s strategies allowed for no serious alternative, that the strengths and weaknesses of its political direction were less important than the justice of its cause, and that whatever setbacks have occurred the struggle will go on. In such cases, political enthusiasm is posited at the expense of historical understanding and to the detriment of the movement’s capacity to draw lessons from all aspects of its past, its failures as well as its successes.

At issue are the means through which a social movement imposes its own definite mark on the social conditions and popular consciousness of these conditions, which it finds as its objective presuppositions. In one respect, it is a question of the movement’s instrumental efficacy: whether in ‘the narrow sense’ it can achieve its aims. It is also a question, however, of the social character of the movement, for the strategies it chooses are expressions of the movement’s composition, organisation and leadership. The choice of strategies is not merely utilitarian but a manifestation of the kind of movement which makes them and of the kind of society which that movement represents. In this regard, strategy may be seen as an external mark of a movement’s social content.

In the context of South Africa, the development of the liberation movement has often been understood in relation to a sequence or progression of distinct historical phases. Each phase or period is seen to correspond with a definite political orientation assumed by the movement. Thus the 1940s have appeared as the final ‘period of petitions’, when deputations were sent to government, reliance was placed on liberal reform from above and a deep alienation split the middle class leadership of the movement from the mass militancy of the base. In Mandela’s words, it was the culmination for the ANC of 37 years in which:

it adhered strictly to a constitutional struggle. It put forward demands and resolutions; it sent delegations to the Government in the belief that African grievances could be settled through peaceful discussion and that Africans could advance gradually to full political rights.  

According to this history, tensions within elitist, middle class politics came to a head in the course of the 1940s with the growth on the one side of an urban, black proletariat at the centre of the economic and political stage, and with the growing intransigence of government on the other. This was exemplified by Smuts’ suppression of the African Mineworkers’ Strike, the creation of segregated political institutions for Coloureds and Asians, the extension of influx controls and crucially the election in 1948 of the National Government. The rise to dominance within the movement of the Youth League and the ANC’s adoption of its Programme of Action in 1949 sealed the closure of a period of constitutional appeals and heralded the start of the period of mass action, through boycotts, strikes, civil disobedience and non-cooperation.

The 1950s, as it appears in this history, was the period of mass struggle, ideally non-violent in form, but based on direct action and militant confrontation. Its goals

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were consistently democratic, no longer based on the quest for privilege on the part of the black petty bourgeoisie, but on the slogan of ‘one man, one vote’. Such a strategy was possible in the 1950s because the terrain of extra-parliamentary protest continued to carry some degree of legal protection. It was necessary, as the ANC’s Strategy and Tactics (1969) document said, ‘for the moulding of mass political consciousness’. With the massive state crackdown on the strikes and demonstrations which followed the slaughters at Sharpeville and Langa, this period of legal, non-violent mass action came to its close. Such methods were in the ANC’s eyes ‘demonstrably no longer feasible’.

The turn to armed struggle was a necessity in 1961, according to this version of events, because, as Mandela put it, ‘all lawful modes of expressing opposition . . . had been closed by legislation . . . the Government had decided to rule by force alone’.7 It had become possible because, in the ANC’s words,8 of the ‘disillusionment with the prospect of achieving liberation by traditional peaceful processes’ felt by the masses, the growth of a political leadership ‘capable of gaining the organised allegiance of the people for armed struggle’ and the emergence of ‘favourable objective conditions’ for armed struggle internationally and locally. This turn was presented as a progression: not so much for the leadership, most of whom understood that ‘the privileges of the minority will only be wrenched from it by a reversion to armed combat’, but for the overwhelming majority of black people who had to learn this lesson from the bitter fruit of their own experience. It seemed to be the product of an inexorably unfolding process of struggle, in which ‘each phase . . . played a part in setting the stage for our new approach’. Slovo put the matter of the turn pithily:

The strategic turning point came in the early 1960s because that was approximately the time when the ruling class made clear its intention of smashing the black opposition totally: that was the time when it finally sealed off all avenues for effective opposition without the element of organized force.9

History, so it seemed, ‘left us no choice’. The period of armed struggle was born.

Recently, this general approach has been given theoretical expression through the concept of ‘periodisation’. Foremost among its exponents has been Wolpe.10 From his perspective, law and the state define the terrain on which class struggles take place. Thus within the history of apartheid, Wolpe argues, there have been three periods, each characterised by a definite form of state which in turn determines the nature of struggles possible from below. Wolpe offers a conventional account of the period 1948–1961 as one of legal, non-violent mass struggle and direct action, and of the period 1961–1973 as one of illegality and armed struggle. His innovation was to theorise the period of 1973 to the present, which is presented as a synthesis of a reconstructed mass overground now combined with the armed underground.

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7 Mandela, op. cit., pp. 156.
8 All quotations are from the ANC’s ‘Strategy and Tactics’, Sechaba, 3, 7, July 1969.
9 Slovo, op. cit., pp. 171 and 188.
The difficulties which Wolpe faces in this thesis serve to illustrate the wider problems we have raised. While the periodisation theory allows Wolpe to explain strategy in terms of the state, the question of what gives rise to the state is not addressed. Wolpe describes the transition from one form of state to another but does not explain it. This is not merely an accidental result of his focus being elsewhere, but an effect of the method he employs. The state, Wolpe suggests, is either the product or the determinant of class struggle. It cannot be both. Wolpe counterposes the question of the determination of class struggles by the state to that of the determination of the state by class struggle, as if these questions belonged to incompatible epistemological realms. But the choice is an artificial one. There is no reason why the critic should not combine investigation of the effects of the state on class struggle (a process which is on or near the surface of political life) and of the origins of the state in class struggle (a more deeply hidden process, the unearthing of which requires a great deal of critical labour). If we follow Wolpe in subordinating the search for origins to the search for effects, we should be forced into adopting either the positivistic view that changes in the state simply happen without explanation or the anti-marxist view that they have nothing to do with the class struggle. Neither of these are conclusions which Wolpe himself would wish to draw.

Historically, Wolpe’s view does not fit happily with the evidence. Between his first and second periods, a prima facie case can be made that the turn from legal to armed struggle was necessitated by the transformation of the state and its laws in the early 1960s. The transition, however, from the second to third period certainly did not follow this pattern. In this case, the rebirth of the mass movement — in the form of trade unions, community groups, strikes and demonstrations — occurred under the weight of an unreconstructed state. Major state ‘reforms’ only began in earnest in the 1980s, in the wash of a mass movement whose origins Wolpe uncontroversially dates back to the Natal strikes of 1973. Perhaps it was Wolpe’s focus on the state as the determinant of the movement’s strategic options that obscured his appreciation of the emergence of a ‘new period’ at the time of its inception and delayed his theorisation of it for almost a decade.

Finally, in regard to the effects of the state on class struggle, Wolpe offers a restrictive view of what strategies were feasible. If we grant, for example, that state repression in 1961 left the movement’s commitment to non-violence untenable, it does not follow that the turn to violence had to take the particular form adopted by the liberation movement. The difficulty, in our view, is that Wolpe tends to abstract the effects of law and the state from the class relations within which they are imbricated and from the social forces which they seek to express and mould. Thus the same form of state which Wolpe saw as crucial in explaining the turn to armed struggle in the 1960s — in particular, the subordination of the state in general to the military and the bureaucracy — was not capable of preventing the revival of a mass movement in the 1970s. Wolpe tends to magnify the state’s powers of determination.

11 An analogy may be drawn with Marx’s discussion of the determination of social relations by value (the ‘personification’ of things) and the determination of value by social relations of production (the ‘materialisation’ of social relations). For a useful discussion of Marx’s method, see I. Rubin, Essays on Marx’s Theory of Value.
and conversely to naturalise the strategic decisions taken by the movement.

Within the orthodox approach special focus has been directed to the relation between legal and illegal methods of struggle and between non-violence and armed struggle. These categories have been central axes of the movement’s strategies and tactics, but in some respects what they obscure is as important as what they reveal. Thus orthodox attempts to attribute the ‘failures’ of the 1950s to the shortcomings of liberalism and non-violence undoubtedly have more than a germ of truth. They leave out of consideration, however, other political problems concerning the ways in which mass mobilisation and direct action were handled. If all the problems of the 1950s are attributed to the legal and non-violent character of the struggles of that period, the solution of abandoning legality and non-violence appears naturally to follow. But the strategies of mass mobilisation pursued by the Congress Alliance in the 1950s possessed political characteristics which were not as evident as the commitment to non-violence and legality, but none the less significant for that. Some of the weaknesses attributed to the movement’s liberalism and pacifism had roots in deeper processes which were not resolved by the turn to armed struggle alone. The result of subsuming all political and class issues to the imperative of breaking the constitutional mould was that some of the strengths of the ‘peaceful’ period, especially its commitment to mass mobilisation and organisation, were jettisoned; while some of its weaknesses, the origins of which lay more in the class than the legal character of the movement, were accentuated. A tendency was born which threatened to equate armed struggle with revolution and legal struggle with reformism.

The periodisation model reflects rather than explores the rigid separations which were in fact established between the periods of legal and illegal struggles. Here lie its limits. It reinforces what we might call a ‘sequential exclusivism’, according to which legal methods are reserved for one period and violent methods for another. It rules out a more fluid conception of their interconnections, until, that is, the arrival of a further period capable of synthesising them. In this regard, periodisation theory offers a historical justification for what Slovo, for instance, saw as the weakest aspect of the turn to armed struggle — its failure to combine armed struggle with mass mobilisation. 12 It presents this schism as a natural necessity in the period under question and as a required stage in the movement’s overall development.

We wish to suggest an alternative to this mode of analysis. Beneath the seemingly natural and rational character of the movement’s strategies, definite political choices were at stake, the origins and effects of which require explanation. A wider set of options were available than is apparent in the orthodox literature. Beneath the ideas of legality, illegality, violence and non-violence, there are political issues not revealed by these categories, which need to be brought to the light of day and openly discussed. In contrast to a theory which reflects the movement’s historical tendency to reserve legal methods of struggle for one period, illegal methods for another and their combination for yet another, we believe that space should be opened up for a

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12 Slovo appreciated the problem that during the 1960s the importance of the mass base was ‘theoretically appreciated, but in practice mass political work was minimal’, op. cit., p. 193. At issue is his and Wolpe’s analysis of the problem.
more challenging discourse. To this end, we explore three important moments in the post-war struggle – the miners' strike of 1946, the election strike of 1958 and the turn to armed struggle.

The African Mineworkers' Strike of 1946

During the war the general level of trade unionism among African workers grew rapidly. By September 1945 the Council of Non-European Trade Unions claimed a national membership of 158 000 in 119 unions embracing more than 40 per cent of the 390 000 Africans employed in commerce and manufacturing.\(^\text{13}\) Whilst the history of trade unionism cannot be equated with the record of strike actions, nonetheless such action does afford a guide to the state of militancy of the workers in question. During the war years the level of strike action rose considerably, as is illustrated in the following table:\(^\text{14}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>No of Strikes</th>
<th>No of Whites (000)</th>
<th>No of Blacks (000)</th>
<th>Man Days Lost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>.7</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>.7</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>23.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1942</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>49.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1943</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>47.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1944</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>.2</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>62.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1945</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>91.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In spite of the increase in union membership and strike action, the response of the union leaderships did not generally reflect the militancy of black workers. The demands of legality, respectability and political support for the national war effort were often placed before the economic demands of the workers.

The Communist Party, for example, initially adopted an anti-war position during the period of the German-Russian pact. With the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941 it reverted to support for the Smuts government's war effort. In the field of trade unionism, the Party took the view that strike action should be employed only as a last resort. Reflecting this position, the Central Committee issued the following statement in October 1942:

The Central Committee ... believes the war situation calls for the full and uninterrupted mobilisation of all labour reserves, and that the working class, as a whole, in solid in its determination to take all the action necessary for the defeat of Hitlerism. Where sections of the working class resort to strike action it is because conditions are forcing them to obtain relief from the crushing burden imposed upon them and no alternative means of gaining some improvement appear to be open to them.\(^\text{15}\)

\(^{13}\) O'Meara 'The 1946 African Mineworkers' Strike and the Political Economy of South Africa', *Journal of Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, (1975), 146.


\(^{15}\) Statement of the Executive Committee of the Communist Party in Communists' Plan for Victory (1943) in Carter/Karis Microfilm Collection Reel 3A Document 62/1.
The ANC supported the war from its commencement. The resolution adopted by the National Executive on July 7th 1940 stated *inter alia* that, 'the executive expresses loyal sympathy with the British Commonwealth of Nations in the difficult task that has been thrust upon them . . . '  

This support for the government was extended to trade union affairs, as is well illustrated by the contents of a letter which Dr Xuma, then President-General of the ANC, wrote to General Smuts:

We are alarmed at the number of avoidable strikes that have taken place recently. It also seems to us that the method used to deal with some of the participants in these strikes are not calculated to improve the situation . . . We deplore the occurrence of any strike at the present time, as we realise that they tend to impede the national war effort as well as to strain race relations between whites and black.  

Many trade union leaders independent of the ANC and SACP shared the same commitments to legality and co-operation with the government. The ANC’s legalistic attitude was not only confined to trade unionism, but was evident in its role in the community-based struggles of the 1940’s, particularly during the Alexandra bus boycott. When bus fares were raised in August 1943, Africans in Alexandra responded by way of a boycott. After a week, a demonstration of some 10 000 men, women and children took place in Johannesburg. The government responded by announcing that a Commission of Enquiry would be held and that fares would be pegged until the Commission reported. Dr Xuma lent ANC authority to the Commission by claiming this decision was a great victory and that the exemplary behaviour of the residents had won great sympathy.  

Hirson commented:

The Commission removed the issue from an area in which the poor could directly intervene and took it into an official area where it was debated by lawyers and accountants. For the ANC a settlement by orderly and punctually terminated protest would serve to emphasise the responsibility of African political organisations.  

The source of a legal approach to trade unions may be traced back to the development of the African union movement during the late 1930s and early 1940s. In particular, Max Gordon was able to build a number of unions by using the wage board as a means of gaining wage increases for his members. In this fashion Gordon and his unions successfully co-operated with the Department of Labour. Their use of legal methods brought significant gains in terms of wages and was an important factor in the growth of trade unionism in this period. It represented an alternative means of struggle at a time when strike actions met with disastrous defeats. The question at issue after 1942, however, concerns the pursuit of legal methods, which had been once advantageous, in a rapidly changed situation. Until December 1942, with the passing of War Measure 145, which outlawed all strikes, the unions were able to operate relatively freely. Indeed in 1941 the Secretary of Justice sent a circular to police, instructing them not to arrest nor prosecute Africans on strike until

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17 Xuma Papers ABX 421229.  
19 David Harries (Baruch Hirson), 'Daniel Koza: Trade Unionist' *African Perspectives*, 19, 1981.
the matter had been reported to the Departments of Labour and of Native Affairs and until worker representatives were given the opportunity of settling the dispute. 20 During this period the Allied Forces were facing severe pressures; several Afrikaner groups opposed to the war effort were particularly active and under close police surveillance. The government was not in a position to crack down on the African trade union movement and saw the maintenance of industrial peace and production as of paramount importance. Thus the unions continued to organise on the basis of a degree of state sanction.

From December 1942, however, the State began to crack down with increasing force on the black union movement, as was well illustrated in its response to the power strike of January 1944, when some 4,000 workers at five power stations came out. The compounds were surrounded by police, armoured cars stood by in readiness and members of the Native Military Corps were sent into the power stations to keep the turbines operating. The African Gas and Power Workers’ Union agreed to ‘return’ to work without consulting the workers.

The Minister of Native Affairs made clear the new position adopted by the government when he informed Dr Xuma that ‘the strike was illegal from beginning to end . . . the workers and their leaders had given evidence before the Landsdowne Commission and had no option but to wait for the report’. 21 In spite of the narrowing terrain on which to organise legally with State co-operation, most of the union movement was still committed to a conciliatory approach and a dependency upon legal channels. For example, in assessing the unrest which had occurred on the mines in 1942 and 1943, the Landsdowne Commission commended the restraining role played by Gana Makabeni, the chairperson of CNETU, as well as the CNETU itself. 22

By 1944 the State crackdown had begun to have a profound effect upon the cohesion of the union movement. The Progressive Trade Union group argued for there to be a clear link between economic demands and the demands of the national liberation movement for a full franchise. Their isolation within CNETU, however, culminated in the expulsion of Dan Koza and C R Phoffy from CNETU in 1945. During 1944 and 1945 much energy was spent on infighting between the groups. CNETU’s disdain for the PTU was revealed in a pamphlet written by Sen. Basner entitled ‘Wreckers at Work’, the contents of which he was invited to reiterate at the CNETU conference in April 1945. ‘In the larger field of national liberation and democratic rights such adventures may lead the non-European masses into costly and fruitless adventures, unless responsible leaders of the African and other non-European sections take energetic steps to organise’. 23

Such deeply felt divisions left the union movement weakened with diminishing ability to sustain support for major industrial action. Consequently the major manifestation of worker militancy during the period, the African Mine Workers’ strike of 1946, must be evaluated in terms of this background.

20 Ibid.
21 Xuma Papers, ABX 4402026 at 573.
23 Carter/Karis Microfilm Collection, Reel 9A, Document 2 XB6 84.
In 1941 the editor of ‘Inkululeko’, Edwin Mofutsenyana, suggested that the Communist Party should form a trade union amongst African mineworkers.  

The Communist Party conceded that it was too small to accomplish such a task alone and organised a conference to launch the proposed union in conjunction with the ANC and others. A fifteen man committee was constituted to develop the African Mine Workers’ Union, of whom eight were members of the Communist Party, a fact of importance in evaluating the union’s record. From its inception, the Union pressed for wage increases, an end to the migrant labour system and recognition of the union, but within a legal, no-strike framework. Following a number of ‘spontaneous’ work stoppages in 1943, the government appointed the Lansdowne Commission. Although the African Mine Workers’ Union conference in August 1944 found the Commission’s recommendations completely unacceptable, delegates who called for strike action were still dissuaded by an executive consciously concerned about hampering the war effort or transgressing the bounds of legality.

Miners’ grievances were aggravated further by the food shortages of 1945 and by April 1946 the 2,000 delegates at the annual conference of the union resolved to demand a minimum wage of 10s a day, adequate food and the withdrawal of war Measure 145, effectively prohibiting trade union meetings of more than twenty persons or mine property.

The Union executive preferred to continue its course of attempting to negotiate with the Chamber of Mines. The Chairman of the Union, J B Marks, commented on the union’s ability to temper its members’ anger when he told a mass Emergency Conference of the AMWU in 1945 that ‘the mine officials and compound managers admit that our meetings encouraged discipline amongst the workers. Far fewer cases of such actions as the stoning of compound managers’ houses have occurred since these meetings were in progress.’

Finally it was the spontaneous action of the workers which forced the unions to support them. On Sunday the 4th August 1946, some 1 000 delegates attended a meeting at which the decision to call a strike on August 12th was taken. Simons & Simons write that ‘the proceedings were widely published, but mine owners and government refused to credit Africans with the capacity to organise concerted action on a large scale in defiance of the elaborate system of surveillance, intimidation and espionage that operated in the compounds.’ But it was not only the government and the mine owners who doubted the efficacy of the strike call. In evidence at the trial of a members of the Communist Party charged with sedition, inter alia, on the grounds of attempting to engineer the strike, Communist Party member Braam Fischer told of how he had decided to go on holiday during August 1946, believing that no major crisis would occur. He conceded (though we should be cautious about evidence drawn from a state trial) that the Communist Party had been caught completely off track.

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25 Brookes, ibid., p. 69.

26 O’Meara, op. cit., p. 163.


28 Inkululeko 10/3/45.

29 Jack & Ray Simons, op. cit.
guard and had not expected the strike to occur.\textsuperscript{30}

The union leadership took an extremely cautious and equivocal approach to the strike. As J. B. Marks put it when discussing his role in the strike:

I explained to them what a strike would involve, sacrifices would have to be made, to refrain from falling for any provocation, to be non-violent. To do nothing else on the day of the strike but to remain in their rooms.\textsuperscript{31}

The strike began on 12th August with some 70 000 workers participating. Strong pressure from below had been present from at least 1944, when numerous local strikes had broken out without the support of the union. Support for the miners, however, from the rest of the non-racial union movement did not come particularly quickly. Only on the afternoon of the second day of the strike did the Council of Non-European Trade Unions meet to pass a resolution that if the Chamber of Mines was not prepared to open negotiations with the African Mine Workers’ Union by 15th August, (the fourth day of the strike), they would call a sympathetic general strike.\textsuperscript{32} With limited general support and a hesitant leadership, the miners were exposed to ruthless State action. The union offices were raided and its leaders arrested. An attempt by workers to stage a sit-down strike at the rockface was stopped by the police with considerable brutality — the miners were baton charged and driven up slope by slope to the surface. Similarly, a march by workers to the office of the Chief Native Commissioner in Johannesburg was dispersed by the police with great force. In total, at least 12 Africans were killed and some 1 200 injured.\textsuperscript{33}

The strike was a glorious moment in working class history but its failure still requires explanation. It was not able to win ‘in the narrow sense’ workers’ demands; more broadly it represented a major setback for black unionism in general and the unionization of miners in particular. The objective weaknesses of the black working class and the power of the State machinery played their role. But the strategies adopted by the union leadership and its political advisors must bear some responsibility. The major commentators\textsuperscript{34} on the strike have suggested that it was a watershed in South African politics as the ‘aftermath of the strike saw the merging of most elements of African opposition into a class alliance, articulating a radical nationalist ideology. The strike and the State’s response illustrated the futility of constitutional protest proposed so long by the ANC, together with the considerable physical danger of trade union membership.’\textsuperscript{35} Whether the lessons of the 1946 strike should be encapsulated in the idea of ‘the futility of constitutional protest’ can be explored further by examining the application of these lessons to the struggles of the 50’s. Our


\textsuperscript{31} J. B. Marks, Interview with Sheridan Johns, April 1964, in Carter/Karis Microfilm Collection, Reel 12B.

\textsuperscript{32} \textit{The Star}, 14/8/46.

\textsuperscript{33} O’Meara, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 166.

\textsuperscript{34} The major analysis of the strike is that of O’Meara. See also Simons & Simons, pp. 573 ff.

\textsuperscript{35} O’Meara, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 171.
analysis will be fragmentary. To illustrate the degree of continuity of strategy and discourse which underlay the turn to mass mobilization and direct action, we shall exploit our historical licence to jump more than a decade to the 1958 Election Strike.

The Election Strike

Prior to the General Election on April 16th 1958, Albert Luthuli called for the formation of a united front amongst anti-Nationalist organisations, including the United Party, a call supported by the Congress Alliance. The United Party, carrying the mantel of Smuts, had drifted increasingly to the right. The ANC’s bid for co-operation was particularly surprising, given its own perception of the United Party. As early as 1954, Luthuli had remarked, ‘the long awaited for new native policy of the United Party can be described as being a mark-time order by drill master Mr Strauss with an occasional ‘‘march backward’’ order’. Nonetheless in 1958 Luthuli argued that ‘a United Party victory would provide opportunities for whites and non-whites to come together’, whereas a National Party victory would ‘almost certainly strain already dangerously tense conflicts past breaking point and bring about a national disaster’. Luthuli pointed out that this call was not intended to imply ANC support for the United Party, a party ‘that poisons you slowly while the Nationalists murder you most ruthlessly’, but rather a belief that a United Party victory would more easily open the way to negotiations.

One of the struggles leading up to the adoption of this ‘united front’ approach was the campaign building up within the ranks of the South African Congress of Trade Unions for a national strike in support of a pound a day minimum wage, shorter hours, trade union recognition and an end to the pass laws. The channelling of these worker demands into the broad national campaign over elections reflected the views held by the Congress Alliance leadership. In the face of some opposition SACTU was prevailed upon in its National Workers’ Conference in March 1958 to merge its own strike call with the general call for mass action at election time. Thus the twin slogans of this campaign became ‘Forward to a pound a day victory’ and ‘the Nationalists must go’. It was resolved that there ‘should be a week of national stay-at-home protest and demonstrations in support of the people’s demands’. In practice this meant that the stay-at-home, scheduled to straddle the election day, focussed on the election, whilst the demands for a £1 a day, union recognition and the abolition of the pass laws took on secondary importance. As Luckhardt and Wall put it, ‘the strike call had become less and less a SACTU-orientated campaign and more and more one focussing on the white elections’. Not to antagonise liberal opinion, the ANC ruled against picketing on the days of the stay-at-home.

Preparation for the strike was weak. Instead of township meetings and organisation of workers, the ANC itself refused to put its name to the stay-at-home call and

36 Address by A J Luthuli at 1954 ANC Conference, Carter/Karis Microfilm Collection, Reel 8A.
instead directed its major force to the white election.\textsuperscript{40} Black response was poor. Save in Sophiatown and a few rural areas the call to stay-at-home went unheeded and the campaign, which was meant to last for three days, was called off after one day. This decision was not unanimously accepted by ANC branches, so that Sophiatown's workers held out for three days as had been the original objective.

Luthuli and Oliver Tambo considered the campaign to have been successful. Tambo, the Secretary General of the ANC, in urging the workers to return to work, claimed that:

can be no doubt that the purpose of the protest had, in the main, been achieved. The one day work stoppage had ensured that the grievances and aspirations of the people were considered while the country was engaged in the serious question of choosing a government.\textsuperscript{41}

Luthuli's evaluation was similar, as is shown in his response to the increased majority won by the National Party:

The hope for South Africa now is for the Nationalists to mend their ways. I have not lost hope for South Africa. I see a time not very far away when the electorate will give the country a progressive government'.\textsuperscript{42}

The National Executive Committee of the ANC was less sanguine about the outcome of the strike, considering that the election results had shattered the illusion of change through electoral means. It analysed the strike’s failure in technical terms of inadequate preparation, lack of a ‘neat’ organisational machinery and confusion as to the place of the ANC in the campaign, ‘in other words many people regarded it as a mere SACTU affair’.\textsuperscript{43} There was here no attempt to analyse the failure in terms of the strike’s electoralist orientation.

The Africanist minority within the ANC argued that the ANC was controlled by the white Congress of Democrats and that subordination to white control had been the cause of the campaign’s failure. Their racial exclusivism made them antagonistic to left politics and especially to the CP. They were supported by some trade unions, on the basis that the strike did not advance the cause of Black workers’ wages.\textsuperscript{44} The force of the Africanist explanation for the failure of the strike derived from the lack of interest shown by Blacks in a strike oriented to a ‘whites-only’ election. It was not, however, the multiracialism of the Congress Alliance which engendered this electoralist perspective; deeper issues were at stake. Hirson pointed to an alternative, class-based explanation in his analysis of the stay-at-home campaigns of the 1950’s:

The leadership of Congress had transferred an essentially working class campaign into a broad political front and placed at the fore a false slogan which related to the coming general election . . . We cannot say definitely that the campaign would have succeeded . . . But there could

\textsuperscript{40} Socialist League of Africa (Baruch Hirson) ‘South Africa: 10 years of the stay-at-home’, \textit{International Socialism}, 5, 1961, p. 5. See also Albert Luthuli’s letter to every voter in \textit{Karis & Carter}, Vol III at 426.

\textsuperscript{41} Rob Lambert, ‘The Programme of Action Implemented’.

\textsuperscript{42} \textit{Ibid}.

\textsuperscript{43} Report of the National Executive of the ANC.

\textsuperscript{44} Luckhardt & Wall, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 354 and \textit{Karis and Carter}, Vol III, p. 435.
have been a greater response if the slogan had been confined to ‘£1 a day’ — a slogan which had the support of the entire urban working class. It could have been more successful if the trade union movement had been the centre of the campaign and if the appeal had been directed mainly to the industrial workers. Whereas an economic struggle can get a response when the demand has the support of the workers, a political strike, directed at affecting an all-white election, cannot get the response that was needed to keep the worker at home.  45

From this perspective, the major weakness of the election campaign was that the economic demands of the workers were subordinated to the broad alliance orientation of the Congress. This was explicitly justified at the time by the need not to alienate middle class support, both white and black.  46

The Election Strike not only subsumed within itself trade union demands, it also subsumed the demands most energetically pursued by women against the extension of pass laws to them and for the abolition of pass laws in their entirety. Bus boycotts, which raised community concerns on the basis of community and not trade union organisation, were channelled in a similar direction. Black workers had shown their willingness to fight over political issues. The problem lay not so much in the subordination of economics to politics but rather in the substance of the politics which prevailed. The reluctance of black workers to identify with the Election Strike did not indicate an inability to identify with political issues in general beyond the workplace. Their active support depended on the particular political programme in question. Retreating somewhat from economistic strains his critique, Hirson put the matter well:

The African could not be called upon to intervene in parliamentary affairs which did not affect him appreciably. The African is far too wary to enter battle when victory can only lead to a United Party victory. Verwoed must go — but not in order to be replaced by Graaff . . . The African people are not interested in “white politics”. It is not that the African will only respond to bread and butter politics but that he can see little reason for intervening where little or nothing can be achieved and when the methods proposed are suspect.  47

Sharpeville and Its Aftermath

The ANC called 1959 its anti-pass year. However its passivity and the weakness of the campaigns alarmed the Africanists, who had broken from the ANC and formed the PAC, and allowed them to take the initiative. They instigated a militant civil disobedience campaign which, without much preparation or organisation, was uneven in its effects.  48 The campaign resulted in the tragic events at Sharpeville in which 87 Africans were killed and at Langa in Cape Town where a further 17 were killed.

45 Hirson, op. cit., p. 11. See also Dan Thloome ‘Lessons of the “Stay-Away”’, Liberation, 14 August 1958.
46 Ben Turok ‘South Africa: The Violent Alternative’ Socialist Register, 1972, pp. 257-278.
In the aftermath of these massacres, a wave of militancy struck the urban areas of South Africa. Mass protests occurred near Vereeniging, 10 000 protested in Evaton, 4 000 in Van Der Bijl Park and between 2 000 and 5 000 marched on central Cape Town. The ANC responded to these outbreaks of militancy by proclaiming a National Day of Mourning when everybody throughout the country should stay away from work. This response reflected the nationalist Christian ethics of Luthuli with its emphasis on prayer rather than on deepening and extending the actions initiated by the workers. This was well illustrated in Luthuli’s call for, ‘a top level meeting of African leaders with the leaders of all political parties’, lest there should occur ‘a further deterioration in race relations’.49

The scope for pressurising the State was considerable. When Luthuli declared, ‘I have no intention of ever carrying a reference book again and I hope that all other Africans will voluntarily follow my example’, 50 and publicly burnt his pass book, the State responded at first with some concessions. The head of police issued instructions to the effect that ‘Bantu, male or female, is to be asked for his or her reference book or any other documents. No Bantu will be taken into custody because he is not in possession of his reference book’.51 The State was under pressure and offered temporary conciliation.

Having seen the State retreat, the ANC did not seek to intensify the pressure through strike action. In reflecting upon the events some years later, Turok went further in his self-criticisms:

1960 was a testing time . . . the militancy was growing outside, but we were so preoccupied with the legal processes, we didn’t have the right conception of revolution as opposed to pressure. We didn’t make the right break.52

The ‘legal processes’ referred especially to the long-drawn out Treason Trial. What was the ‘right conception of revolution’ was still not clear. Black workers pursued the struggle far beyond the plans set by their leaders. After a strike which brought Cape industry to a standstill, 30 000 people marched toward central Cape Town. The PAC leadership was caught offguard by this spontaneous protest. Phillip Kgosana, the secretary of the Cape PAC, admitted that he first heard of the march whilst in bed, and he had to be given a lift by an African reporter to get to the head of the procession.53

In spite of limited leadership, the declaration of a state of emergency on March 30th and the mass arrest of over 11 000 Africans, the strikes and demonstrations continued for another 5 days. Only when the State recovered the initiative, the leadership was imprisoned and the workers were exhausted by a prolonged strike and the effects of brutal police assaults, at the point when the tide of militancy had receded, did the ANC call a general strike for the first time, a call which the workers were by now incapable of meeting.

49 The Star, 28/3/60.  
50 The Star, 28/3/60.  
51 The Star, 28/3/60.  
52 Lambert, op. cit., p. 117.  
53 Feit, op. cit., p. 52.
One last attempt was made to organise mass pressure on the government. A conference of leaders from the Congress Alliance, the PAC and from other groups was called for December 1960. The PAC soon left, claiming that such conferences achieved nothing but ANC domination and thus served to place the African people under the spell of foreign elements and foreign ideologies. The ANC went ahead with the conference, which met on March 25th and 26th, 1961. It called upon the government to prepare a national convention of elected representatives of all adult men and women, on an equal basis irrespective of race, colour, creed or other limitations, by May 31st, 1961. The conference warned that failure by the government to comply would be met by massive demonstrations from 29th to 31st May, which coincided with the proclamation of South Africa as a Republic.

On April 14th it was decided, in view of the government’s and opposition parties’ reaction to the call, that the three day strike would take place. The State was forewarned and some 10 000 Africans were arrested (ostensibly for pass offences). In addition, the State passed a new law allowing for the detention of persons for 12 days without bail. By the second day, Mandela told the workers to return to work, as, ‘the strike was not the national success I had hoped for. This closes a chapter in our methods of political action.’ The actual effectiveness of the strike is not easy to gauge. What is certain, however, is that as far as the leadership of the Congress and PAC were concerned, the time for mass protest was over.

There can be no doubt that police terror and intimidation were important reasons for the failure of the strike, as was suggested by the ANC. Hirson, by contrast offered a heterodox polemic against blaming the state exclusively for the defeats of the movement.

We are frankly tired of this excuse. It has been used now for the past few failures and is always produced after the event. Surely we have to be political simpletons not to take this into account in planning campaigns.

Hirson’s theory of the state, however, did not break with the orthodox assessment of its potency:

We face a strong, arrogant and confident ruling class . . . fortified by a state machine on which it can rely. Above all else it has an army, a police force and auxiliaries . . . which it can rely on at all times. The present government and its supporters are also not immediately hit by the withdrawal of labour because they are not the direct owners of the mines, the factories or the large commercial houses.

Hirson conceded that the authorities had admitted ‘to indecision and a marked nervousness’, but underestimated the tensions and difficulties running through the ruling circles.

Capital in South Africa was distinctly jittery. In the fifteen months after Sharpeville gold and foreign reserves dropped by R173m. to R142m. and the stock market

54 ibid., p. 55.
55 Luckhardt & Wall, op. cit., p. 364.
56 The Star, 30/8/61.
58 ibid., p. 12.
and gold price plummeted. There was a capital outflow of R12m. per month in 1960 and the first half of 1961 as foreign investors lost their confidence. Within the ruling class alternative strategies were aired, with the ‘reformist’ option by no means ruled out. In May 1960, for instance, P. O. Sauer, acting as Prime Minister in place of Dr. Verwoerd (who was recovering from an attempt on his life), called for reform of the government’s black policy in four areas: the application of the pass laws, the supply of liquor to Africans, the level of wages and the political rights of urban blacks. For Sauer, ‘the old book of South African history was closed at Sharpeville’.60

The English press was more forthright in expressing its demands. An editorial in The Star admonished that ‘the overriding duty rests on the government to recognise that the use of the forces of the state to restore a respect for authority and law offers no solution to our human and race problems’.61 Five business associations, the Federated Chamber of Industries, the Associated Chamber of Commerce, the Chamber of Mines, the Afrikaanse Handelsinstitut and the Steel and Engineering Industries Federation of South Africa, presented a memorandum to the Prime Minister demanding major policy reforms, including changes in the qualification for permanent urban residence and amendments to trade union legislation regarding black workers.62

The state did not automatically resolve these tensions within the ruling class. The apartheid state had its own weaknesses. Its Defence Force operated essentially on the basis of equipment handed down from World War II. Defence expenditure was not high by contemporary standards, in 1958–59 standing at 36 million rand, in 1959–60 at 40 million and in 1960–61 at 44 million. It was only in subsequent years that it escalated from 72 million in 1961–62, to 210 million in 1964–65.63 There is evidence that in the immediate aftermath of Sharpeville many country towns were denuded of police, as re-inforcements were rushed to the major urban flashpoints. We have seen how the police conceded in the heat of the struggles a relaxation in the enforcement of pass laws. The state was not omnipotent.

Substantial difficulties faced South Africa’s rulers in 1960–61: an economic crisis that had been threatening before the Sharpeville period, a withdrawal of confidence by foreign investors, mass urban strikes and demonstrations (in Cape Town and Johannesburg absenteeism by workers reached over 90 per cent), the outbreak of rural revolts like that in Pondoland — although these were not closely linked with the urban uprisings. The state apparatus had not yet, in crucial respects, been restructured to meet the emergence of a mass black industrial working class, and the rulers themselves were undecided as to which path to tread. We do not wish to exaggerate these difficulties, but rather to pose the question of the extent to which the movement was able to exploit them.

60 The Star, 15/5/60.
61 The Star, 31/3/60.
63 P. H. Frankel, Pretoria’s Praetorians, 1984, p. 31 and 72.
64 Albertyn, op. cit., p. 32.
The post-Sharpeville strike rapidly became general and political, extending beyond trade union issues of wages and conditions of labour and posing a major challenge to the state. No political organisation at the time seemed prepared for leading this level of mass struggle. Certainly there existed no programme, plan or perspective on the seizure of power. Nor was there a serious attempt to extend the general strike or link it with other struggles, in order to press for clearly stated economic and political demands. Nor was there an initiative to protect Black people from the violence of the army and police forces through the establishment of self-defence organisations. The implicit question which we wish to pose is whether these ‘absences’ point to the possibility of alternative directions not offered at the time.

One of the dominant motifs in the Congress perspective was its commitment to non-violent struggle. Moral and political considerations informed this perspective: a Christian abhorrence of the dehumanising effects of violence and a pragmatic appreciation of the imbalance between an unarmed black people and a state ready to employ the military force at its disposal. When violence erupted, however, mainly from the guns of the police but also from the anger of Black workers, the movement had no way of channelling, organising and leading it. Black workers were left to their own devices, such that the principle of non-violence led to and expressed a marked division between the leadership and the mass. The threat of massive police repression, once the state recovered its initiative, seemed to have had little influence on the manner in which the campaign was conceived.

Secondly, the stay-at-home did constitute a form of mass activity, built upon the specific conditions of work and home to which Black people were subjected. As a tactic, however, it had its limitations, as cogently expressed by Hirson:

The people of the townships cannot stay at home indefinitely. To do so is to starve . . . Far worse, the army and the police showed . . . that they could go from house to house, drag the inhabitants out, beat them up and force them to work . . . Secondly, by staying in the townships, the worker surrenders all initiative. He cuts himself off from his fellow-worker in other townships. He divides himself from his allies in the rural areas and he surrenders the entire economic centre to his enemies.65

When in 1960 black workers had left their homes and townships to embark upon active campaigns of demonstration and protest in the industrial heartlands of urban South Africa, the call to stay at home served as a retreat from positions already gained.

Unlike the Election Strike, political goals were on the agenda during the Sharpeville period which were of direct concern to black workers: the abolition of pass laws, the survival of their own organisations, the freedom of their leaders, the future of apartheid rule. The defeat of the movement cannot be attributed to a lack of emphasis on bread and butter trade union issues, as one kind of revisionist account suggests. The problem of leadership lay not in the subordination of economics to politics, of trade unionism to the democratic movement as a whole. While it was true, as Lambert commented, that trade union work was pre-empted by the national

campaign, it was equally true, as Lambert added, that political events had their own logic and timing, and that the workers themselves were unwilling to tie their movement to the day-by-day construction of grass roots organisations. A trade union oriented critique of a kind offered by writers such as Edward Feit was based on a historically untenable association between the pursuit of working class interests and the privileging of trade unionism alone.  

An alternative ‘revisionist’ interpretation of events has suggested that reforms were impossible under apartheid and that Congress should never have adopted this stance. Such an argument is innocent. Trade union activity won economic gains for workers, campaigns against the pass laws succeeded in delaying the imposition of passes onto women. The real problem facing Congress was not whether to fight for reforms but how. When in 1960 the movement’s leadership was faced with galloping militancy from below and repression from above, and with the need — difficult to realise at the best of times — for a radical shift of strategy, its alienation from the mass of urban and rural workers led to an impasse. They were not able to build upon the explosion of mass militancy nor conceive a transition from a gradual fight for reforms to a decisive struggle for power.

The Turn to Armed Struggle

The orthodox version of events from the Congress perspective has been written up widely, not least in the organs of the ANC and SACP. Historically, this was by far the most important response. Emphasis was placed on Sharpeville as a turning point: from non-violence to armed struggle, from legality to the underground, from protest to a challenge for power. Turok put it this way: ‘The shootings at Sharpeville marked a turning point. Not only did it highlight the wanton violence of the oppressors but it removed any belief in the possibility of making a dent in the system by means of protest politics alone’.  

We have already noted the ANC’s review of this period in their 1969 Strategy and Tactics document:

the general strike as a method of political mobilisation . . . could no longer be effectively employed as an instrument of mass struggle . . . and the use of orthodox demonstrations as an effective weapon was demonstrably no longer feasible . . . All opposition by legal or peaceful means was rendered impossible.

A number of issues were fused in this passage. The question of the general strike was different from that of peaceful and legal means of struggle. In South African conditions a successful general strike is likely at some stage to require illegal and violent means of defence and offence. Was it the case that the general strike and mass demonstrations were no longer feasible? A massive general strike had just rocked the regime; its eventual failure did not show that it was unfeasible but that ways had to be

found to pursue it further. The disappointing response to the ANC’s call for a general strike, a week after the momentum of the mass movement had been lost, offered no proof of the unfeasibility of the general strike in general.

Was it the case that ‘all opposition by legal or peaceful means’ had been rendered impossible in 1961? By no means all the parties to the Congress Alliance were immediately made illegal formally, though in reality they all suffered intense state repression. SACTU was not disbanded until 1963 as an open trade union organisation, though its militants were hounded. The new security legislation did not take full effect until 1963 with Rivonia and the 90 Day Act, although 1961 already witnessed the enactment of 12 day detention without trial. The evidence for a severe state crackdown on legal activity is strong, though it was not total. The key, however, lay in the movement’s view of the capacity of the black working class to recover from its defeats. The ANC formulation not only endorsed violent and illegal means, it also ruled out the reconstruction of ‘peaceful and legal means’ on the basis of a revived working class.

In Strategy and Tactics the ANC argued that their prior commitment to legal and peaceful means had been a strategy which would necessarily become redundant at a later stage. This view did not reflect the deep moral commitment to non-violence of men like Luthuli; moreover the public persona of the ANC in the 1950s gave little evidence of the strategic character of its commitments. The ANC defended the exclusive use of legal and non-violent means in the 1950s since the leadership had to ‘relate to the masses and not just to its advanced elements’. Before the necessary turn to armed struggle could occur, it was imperative to wait for ‘the overwhelming majority of the people’ to experience ‘disillusionment with the prospect of achieving liberation by traditional peaceful processes’ and to learn ‘through their own participation . . . that in the long run the privileges of the minority will only be wrenched from it by a reversion to armed combat’. What is questionable historically, however, is who bore the illusions. It would seem from the historical record that many sections of the ‘masses’ did not and could not share their leaders’ avowed commitments to non-violence. The history of the 1950s is not short of examples of violent confrontations between Black people and state forces, in which the former displayed a readiness to fight back which contrasted sharply with their leaders’ disavowals of violence. 68 It needs to be asked why, if the ANC appreciated all along the necessity of armed struggle, it did not complement — as far as it could given legal constraints — the bitter lessons which the masses gained from experience with theoretical lessons from the party. There is little evidence of such a perspective. The picture painted, of a deep gulf between the legal and peaceful phase of the struggle and its illegal and violent phase, neglected the extent to which in the 1950s one form of struggle flowed out of the other — peaceful strikes and demonstrations turning into violent encounters which the leadership’s non-violent principles left disoriented and unorganised.

It has been suggested that the turn to armed struggle after Sharpeville was a major step in the development of a revolutionary stance by the liberation movement, since it broke the limits of legal and non-violent protest. From the point of view of the

working class, however, it also marked the end of a period of forward movement and the beginning of a period of weakness and defeat which was to last for at least a decade. The progression of the movement as a whole followed that of the black workers.

At its December 1960 conference, the Communist Party resolved itself in favour of a campaign of economic sabotage to precede a guerilla war.69 Six months later the ANC followed suit. The strategy envisaged ‘a long term, multi-staged campaign of disciplined violence in which a hard core of trained militants, supported by mass-based political activity and crucial external aid, confront state power with the ultimate goal of seizing it.’70

In spite of this approach, the turn to armed struggle was counterposed rather than subordinated to the mass struggle of urban and rural workers. The result was to isolate the vanguard from the masses, to foster a passive, waiting attitude on the part of the working class. As Turok put it:

The sabotage campaign failed on the main count — it did not raise the level of action of the masses themselves . . . They could find no way of joining in and expressing their support. They were left on the threshold, fascinated bystanders of a battle being waged on their behalf.71

The new strategy ran into further difficulties. Within the ANC itself there was no unanimity concerning the turn to armed struggle to the exclusion of other strategies. As late as 1964 Albert Luthuli still maintained in response to Rivonia that:

the African National Congress never abandoned its method of a militant non-violent struggle and of creating in the process a spirit of militancy in the people. However, in the face of the uncompromising white refusal to abandon a policy which denies the Africans and other oppressed South Africans their rightful heritage — freedom — no one can blame brave just men for seeking justice by the use of violent methods.72

The power of sabotage alone to shake the regime was overestimated, as illustrated in this statement of the CP Central Committee:

Looked at from the viewpoint of the historical process, the South African regime is steadily and swiftly being driven into a position of isolation in which the armaments, capital and other forms of material and moral support which sustain it from abroad will one after another be cut short.73

At precisely the moment at which the ANC and CP decided that ‘the strategy of mass struggle along non-violent lines had exhausted its potential for mobilizing the people’,74 the state began its huge programme of expanding the police and armed forces.75 Once over the crisis of 1960–61, the South African economy grew at a

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70 Slovo, op. cit., p. 186.
71 Turok, op. cit., pp. 45-46.
75 P. H. Frankel, op. cit., p. 72.
rapid rate. The real Gross Domestic Product (at 1958 prices)\textsuperscript{76} increased from R5153m. to R7426m., an increase of 7 per cent per annum over the six year period between 1961 and 1966, with the real growth rate reaching 9.4 per cent in 1963. By 1964 the decline of foreign investment was reversed and by 1965 large amounts of capital began to enter the country again.\textsuperscript{77} The power of the state, to which the movement appealed to explain the defeat of legal struggles in the late 1950s, was all the better prepared to confront the armed struggles of the 1960s.

The passing of a series of security laws, especially those providing detention without trial, coupled with sophisticated interrogation techniques, provided the state with information leading to the arrest of most of the experienced leaders of the Congress Alliance. With the leadership thus weakened and the organisational structures of the Congress Movement smashed, the framework for pursuing mass struggles was effectively destroyed. SACTU was not immediately outlawed, but it was unable to organise any major resistance on the trade union front. By the time of the 9th Annual Conference in March 1964, no less than 45 SACTU officials and members had been banned, removed from office and in most cases confined to magisterial districts.\textsuperscript{78}

By 1964 Umkonto and Pogo, the military arms of the ANC and PAC respectively, had been routed. They were ill-prepared for such a struggle. As Turok commented:

Having talked of fascism for a decade or more, the movements were nevertheless caught by surprise when the police behaved like fascists . . . Remorselessly, the police uncovered the networks and suppressed the organisations. Those who were not caught either went into hiding or fled abroad.\textsuperscript{79}

With the most capable of the leadership in prison or in exile, the political work of the ANC and the trade union work of SACTU sank to its lowest ebb for years. Whereas in 1961 59,952 black workers belonged to 63 unions\textsuperscript{80} by 1969 only 13 unions with 16,040 members were known to exist.\textsuperscript{81}

The ANC and the CP based their commitment to the armed struggle on two assertions: the disillusionment of the masses with constitutional forms of struggle and their readiness to respond to a call for violent struggle. The evidence, however, points to the opposite. Black workers had shown great commitment to certain forms of ‘constitutional’ struggle by joining trade unions, participating in stay-at-homes, demonstrating against pass laws and taking local and national strike actions. Their failure to meet some of the ANC\textquotesingle s calls for action by no means indicated disillusion with all forms of mass action. Further, their lack of response to the 1961 call for a general strike was not solved by the idea that a campaign of sabotage would ‘hasten the development of insurrectionary conditions . . . and a resurgence of black political militancy’.\textsuperscript{82}

\textsuperscript{76} South African Inflation ranged from 2.4\% to 4\% between 1961-1965. See 1966 Statistical Year Book, p. 33.
\textsuperscript{78} Luckhardt & Wall, op. cit., p. 429.
\textsuperscript{79} Turok, op. cit., p. 45.
\textsuperscript{80} M. Horrell, South African Trade Unionism, (Johannesburg, 1961), pp. 55 ff.
\textsuperscript{81} M. Horrell, South Africa’s Workers, (Johannesburg, 1969), p. 145.
\textsuperscript{82} Slovo, op. cit., p. 184.
Notwithstanding the defeat of the campaign and its adverse consequences for the movement in the 1960s, Slovo maintained that 'the conception of the campaign was correct since history left us with no choice'. While the armed struggle could not and did not guarantee success, Slovo argued, an absence of armed resistance would have disoriented the struggle even more:

there can be little doubt that in late 1961 failure by the ANC and its allies to make a public break with the tactics of the previous period would have been seen by these supporters as inaction and as an abdication of their leadership role.

Our own analysis fully supports Slovo's conclusion that 'a public break with the tactics of the previous period' was necessary, if the movement was to retain mass support. But this statement is purely formal: it says nothing about the substance of the problem with the old tactics nor the substance of the break required. Slovo was fully cognisant of the limitations of the alternative tactics adopted by the movement. The armed struggle, he wrote, engendered 'an attitude both within the organisation and amongst the people that the fate of the struggle depended upon the sophisticated actions of a professional elite. The importance of the masses was theoretically appreciated, but in practice mass political work was minimal'.

In explaining, however, why this problem emerged, Slovo naturalised what was in effect a definite political decision. He represented the particular form in which armed struggle was adopted as the only possible form, thus ruling out the possibility of a rational alternative. Wolpe's contribution has been not so much to question the grounds of Slovo's analysis, but to incorporate it within an evolutionary schema of the movement's development. In this light, the armed struggle appears — with all its particular characteristics, warts and all — to have been a necessary stage in the movement's progression toward a political synthesis.

Conclusion

In commenting on the turn to armed struggle in 1961, Turok wrote that 'a huge gap developed between the leading forces and the mass' and that 'the mass did not know what to do'.

Let us take this theme back into the history of the 1940s and 1950s. Beneath the surface of the movement's great strategic transitions, do we not find wrapped in a variety of political guises a recurrence of this selfsame problem? Was not the gap between 'the leading forces' and 'the mass' an Achilles' heel of the movement which in these periods was not to be adequately diagnosed or remedied? In the 1940s the appeals and petitions of the leadership related badly to the direct action of black workers and community residents. In the 1950s the leaders threw themselves into mass mobilisation and direct action. Their focus, however, on the conscience of the liberal middle classes, non-violence and remedy through law was unlikely to resonate with black workers. For workers, escape from the law's clutches was a daily requirement for survival, violence an inescapable

83 ibid., p. 181.
84 ibid., p. 193.
accompaniment of protest, and the fears of the middle classes an obstacle to the fulfilment of their own needs. In the 1960s the leaders addressed themselves to armed struggle and the politics of illegality. The turn, however, divorced the movement’s struggle from the daily struggles of black workers in their homes, communities, factories and farms. It identified the revolution with a culture of violence which workers could not embrace. In all three of these periods, the alienation of the movement’s leaders from its base was little understood and certainly unresolved.

The significance of decisions about strategy is twofold. They cannot be isolated from our knowledge of why victories were won and defeats suffered. In this sense, they serve an instrumental function, as means for attaining the goal of liberation from apartheid or as impediments to that end. Strategies count for more than this, however. They also express the character of the movement: its aspirations, goals and dreams; its critical spirit and rational thirst for truth; its manner of relating to others and of organising itself; the extent of its democratic commitments; the kind of society it offers in place of apartheid. Strategies are visible signs, which enable the outsider to identify the heart of the movement and the movement to see its own reflected image. Through an exploration of strategy we begin to discover not only what a movement is against but more positively what it is and what it is for. This is why we have pursued with such doggedness our motif: that the question of strategy has not yet been adequately ‘de-natured’ nor opened up to critical thought.