

FORCED LABOUR IN COLONIAL AFRICA

A T Nzula, I I Potekhin and A Z Zusmanovich

edited and introduced by Robin Cohen

YEAR OF FIRE, YEAR OF ASH: THE SOWETO REVOLT, ROOTS OF A REVOLUTION?

Baruch Hirson

ONE AZANIA, ONE NATION: THE NATIONAL QUESTION IN SOUTH AFRICA

No Sizwe

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Despite the apparent separateness of their themes, there are common factors binding these books together. In one way or another they are all concerned with the struggle for national liberation and raising the level of political consciousness among the masses in South Africa. All three manifest a bias against the South African Communist Party, its strategy and tactics, despite the fact that the



CP has done more than any other organisation in South Africa to rouse political consciousness and link theory and practice through the application of the principles of Marxism-Leninism.

In the case of the first book, the bias emanates from the editor, not the three writers themselves, who were all active in the Comintern at the time they collaborated on this work, first published in Russian in Moscow in 1933. Nzula himself was the first African general secretary of the Communist Party in South Africa. He went to the Soviet Union in 1931 to study at the Lenin School and died in Moscow in 1933.

Cohen says he chose to retitle the book because its original title *The Working Class Movement and Forced Labour in Negro Africa*

did not accurately reflect the contents. 'The book represents a generalised and trenchant critique of colonialism, where this was possible, from the point of view of workers and peasants themselves. The stress on the working class movement in the original title therefore seemed misplaced'. Leaving aside the question when peasants became workers, it should be noted that the Soviet Africanist Professor A B Davidson has translated the title *Forced Labour and the Trade Union Movement in Negro Africa*, and since the book deals not only with colonial oppression but also with trade unions and peasant movements, the difference in translation emphasis is not without significance.

Cohen adds: 'It was necessary to take certain liberties with, and make some additions to, the original text While every effort has been made to preserve the spirit and style of the original work . . . the reader should bear in mind that the text printed here is not always a word for word translation from the original'. Some of the alterations are minor, some more extensive. Those unable to check with the original Russian may be left uncertain whether they are reading precisely what the authors

intended. In addition, the anti-Soviet and anti-Communist Party bias of the editor and translator Hugh Jenkins (who is credited by Cohen with joint responsibility for the notes) makes it inevitable that the work is not presented in the same spirit as the original. In particular Cohen's discussion of theories about the alleged murder of Nzula by Comintern agents, which he justifies on the grounds that it would be unscholarly to ignore them, is based entirely on hearsay and rumours emanating from anti-Soviet sources without a single fact to back them up. Cohen attempts to get round this obstacle by making accusations in the form of questions. 'Had Nzula begun to question some of the orthodoxies established by Comintern decisions?', he asks. Well, had he? Nobody has said so. Nzula in fact was doing everything the Comintern could have wanted and was one of its most effective propagandists. The circumstances of his death are fully documented at the hospital in which he died in Moscow and are known to Soviet scholars. Why did not Cohen consult the record before continuing to circulate baseless rumours? For Cohen to suck questions out of his thumb and then provide no answers is hardly acceptable to scholarship even in bourgeois circles.

It is a pity the book is blemished in this way. It was Communist scholars who were the first to study the working class movement in Africa, and this book was a pioneer in its field. Though much of the material is inevitably dated, and some chapters are of uneven quality, it is an invaluable contribution to Marxist historiography, and shows that Soviet concern with the African working class movement preceded by decades that of bourgeois scholars, most of whom only became bothered by it after the shakeup of the Second World War had roused the fear that Africa might indeed be ripe for revolution.

One of the points stressed most strongly by Nzula and his comrades, writing in the 1930s, was the growth of political and class consciousness amongst the masses engaged in the struggle against imperialist oppression in Africa. Nowhere has this consciousness spread more widely and been maintained more consistently than in South Africa, the most economically developed country in Africa. The African National Congress, one of the oldest liberation movements on the continent, was born in 1912, and the Communist Party in 1921, and though the CP was outlawed in 1950 and the ANC in 1960, their work of politicisation, organisation and mobilisation in action has continued without interruption in the face of the ever-intensifying repression of the regime. In his book *Year of Fire, Year of Ash*, Baruch Hirson

testifies to the ever-present influence of the ANC in the 1976 Soweto uprising, though he does not by any means hold the organisation exclusively responsible for the revolutionary upsurge of the recent period, documenting in great detail the contribution of other organisations and tendencies, however evanescent.

Hirson also throws considerable light on the relationship between the students and the workers in the June 1976 uprising, as well as in the period before and after. The students quickly realised that they did not by themselves have the power to defeat the forces of the state, and their early calls on the workers for support met with a widespread response. The failure to cement this alliance on a secure foundation he ascribes to lack of organisation and deficiencies in consciousness on the part of both workers and students, 'showing in fact the gulf between themselves (the students) and the men on the factory floor'. Perhaps Hirson does not give sufficient weight to the objective factors, such as the power of the state and the viciousness of police and bosses, which restrict the extent to which political consciousness can be translated into effective action. Most astonishing is his contention that 'in all its outpourings, the Black Consciousness Movement was apolitical'.

Apolitical? Unideological, perhaps, lacking perspective or direction. But one can hardly apply the term apolitical to a movement which, whatever its theoretical shortcomings, has done so much to rouse the consciousness of the African people and move them to action. Many of the exponents of black consciousness have, in fact, since joined the ANC. Hirson spends a great deal of time and space discussing, not unfruitfully, this problem of rousing revolutionary consciousness. The fact that never once in his painstakingly researched book does he find time to discuss the contribution in this sphere of the South African Communist Party can only be described as a deficiency of consciousness on his own part. He is not unaware of its importance; he has simply chosen, for reasons best known to himself, to ignore it.

In his book *One Azania, One Nation*, the scholar who writes under the pseudonym No Sizwe demonstrates both an impressive range of research and an equally impressive range of confusion. While conceding that national oppression exists in South Africa, and that a struggle for national liberation is in progress, he denies the existence of nations or national groups.

'The "races" of South Africa are not "national groups" precisely because they are not nations and because they do not desire separate statehood It is my central thesis that the officially classified population regis-

tration groups in South Africa are colour castes. . . . ' Referring to similar groups in America, he says: 'Because they are denied full cultural, political and economic opportunities within the polity, they are compelled to act together politically. In the process, not unnaturally, they put forward demands which are similar to those of oppressed nationalities, with the significant exception that they neither wish to secede from the nation nor desire cultural autonomy or segregation'.

To continue to talk of nations, national groups, national minorities or races, he maintains, is to play the game of the ruling class, to divide the people, to open the road to Bantustans, and into this category of splitters he puts Soviet scholars like Potekhin, the South African Communist Party, the ANC because they take cognisance of national categories, try to analyse their significance and work out a strategy for effective political action based on the realities of life rather than theoretical fantasies. The fact that No Sizwe refers to 'Africans', 'Coloureds' and 'Indians' in quotation marks and calls them colour-castes instead of something else has not enabled him to formulate either a national theory or a programme of action more effective than that of the existing liberation movement headed by the ANC of which the Communist Party is an important component.

At the end of his book, after demolishing all rival theories (including those of Stalin and Trotsky, though Lenin does not rate a mention), No Sizwe is still compelled to admit that what we witness in South Africa is 'a struggle for full and equal nationhood', though he is still unable to define a nation. The following piece of obfuscation is the best he can manage:

'The working people have resolved in the field of action to create a new South Africa in which the barriers of caste no longer rise up to tower over the nation and imprison its members in separate cells (whereby the capitalist gaolers of the country can the more easily control them). The working class, in short, has become the leading class in the nation and is about to constitute itself as the nation of South Africa'.

Which begs all the questions he is supposed to have answered. By this stage, however, it is too late for No Sizwe to come forward with new definitions. He has shot his bolt and revealed that all his agonising is due to the fact that he does not understand the relationship between class and national struggle in the South African context. His theories, while interesting as semantic exercises, have no practical outlet and are therefore valueless to the liberation movement.

Brian Bunting