Campaign of Repression as Protests Spread in South Africa

Five years have passed since the historic Soweto uprising of June 1976.

Little has changed for South Africa's black majority in those years. Blacks are still denied the rights of citizenship in the country of their birth and live tightly controlled lives of abject poverty created by the apartheid system.

Apartheid not only continues, but is becoming more repressive. The white minority regime is presently cracking down on student, community, and labor leaders in an effort to stem the strikes and protests which are once again sweeping the country. In particular, the regime has focused on mass-arrests. In all, some 200 people have been detained so far in what some observers are describing as the largest government campaign against opponents since October 1977.

The current wave of unrest began in mid-May when a nationwide boycott campaign was triggered off by the regime's 'Republic Day' celebrations. The celebrations, marking the 20th anniversary of the country's withdrawal from the British Commonwealth and its establishment as a republic, had come to symbolize the consolidation of hated white minority rule.

"What have we people to celebrate but poverty, disease, malnutrition, oppression, and exploitation?," asked one black labor leader. "Republics are supposedly founded 'by the people, for the people,'" added another, "but in the case of the South African 'republic,' only 8% of the population endorsed it in 1960, so this republic was foisted on the majority."

As the celebrations got underway, mass protests involving labor unions, students, and community organizations spread across the country and onto the university campuses. South African flags were burned to the chant of "White republic no! People's republic yes!" on a number of campuses, which were then stormed by riot police who dispersed demonstrators and arrested students. In one Cape university alone, 48 students were detained.

Liberation movement activity such as a week long series of sabotage attacks by the African National Congress (ANC), added to the protests and sent thousands of soldiers from the Defence Force into the streets of Durban, Johannesburg, and other major cities. Among the targets of the bombing campaign were rail lines, power lines, and police stations. On May 27, a bomb planted by the ANC blasted a military recruiting station in Durban and
caused hundreds of thousands of dollars in damage.

Also in late May a significant new development emerged in the labor movement when black workers at Ford, General Motors, and Firestone plants in Port Elizabeth staged a militant two week strike in solidarity with workers at the Firestone plant who had been dismissed in an earlier dispute. The largely successful action was led by Motor Assembly and Components Workers Union of South Africa (MACWUSA) - the union which was formed after the two month strike led by Thozamile Botha in late 1979 at the Ford Cortina plant in Port Elizabeth - and served once again to underscore the role of U.S. corporations in the oppression of black South African workers. Major strikes have also taken place at British Leyland's subsidiary in Cape Town and at textile factories in Natal. On May 28 some 1600 black mineworkers at the Buffelsfontein gold mine were dismissed and deported back to the homelands after a work stoppage protesting working conditions.

By the end of June, 60 members of South African Allied Workers Union (SAAWU) alone had been detained, including SAAWU president Thozamile Gqweta and vice president Sisa Njikelana. MACWUSA has also been targeted, with almost every union officer detained, along with such well known union leaders as Joseph Mavi, president of the Black Municipal Workers Union. Earlier in June, Zwelakhe Sisulu, president of Media Workers Association of South Africa and son of imprisoned ANC secretary general Walter Sisulu, was taken from his home where he was under banning orders and placed in detention. And shortly after, Thami Mazwai, the news editor of the Sowetan, was also detained.

Protests continued through early June with police responding particularly harshly to mixed-ancestry ("colored") youth demonstrating in townships outside of Johannesburg. On June 3 thousands of protesters marching in a peaceful demonstration against the detention of student leader Aziz Jardine were attacked by riot police wielding clubs and whips and using tear gas and guard dogs. Witnesses reported unprovoked brutality and widespread beatings by the riot squad.

"I saw mothers, and bystanders beaten and chased into homes," said one witness. "The police were going wild. I had a total feeling of helplessness and when I protested they came at me with a bullwhip and slashed me."

Protests and school boycotts continued through June. Among the students held are Wantu Zentile of the Committee of South African Students (COSAS), Khotso Seatioho of the South African Youth Revolutionary Council, and the chairman and many members of the Black Student Society of the University of Witwatersrand ("Wits"). Progressive white students have also faced the repression. Andrew Boraine, president of the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS), was detained on June 18 and then released and banned along with Sammy Adelman of the Wits Student Representative Council.

This mounting repression exposes the central flaw in Reagan administration claims that signs of positive change in South Africa justify a policy of "constructive engagement". Protest that policy, to the State Department, and White House and help build the campaign to end all support for South Africa.

July 1981.