

# Journey To Pretoria

In the summer of 1984, South Africa entered a new phase. Quiescence was replaced by rebellion, stability gave way to instability. The black majority was no longer prepared to go on in the old way. In this interview with Jonathan Steele, **Joe Slovo**, chairman of the South African Communist Party and the only white member of the ANC national executive committee, discusses where it will all lead.



**E**verybody following the situation in South Africa believes that at some point there'll have to be negotiations between the black majority and the regime. Do you see any sign at all that the regime is prepared for serious negotiations?

We've reached the end of a phase in South Africa as far as the prospects for negotiation are concerned. Botha failed to sell his package of reforms, which really amounted to a form of power-sharing without relinquishing white control, the blacks clearly wouldn't bite, and the outside world was not convinced. Today the Botha regime has neither the will nor the constituency of support to make any kind of bold leap forward. In the recent period the reform noises have become more and more muffled. The tactic of the regime now is to dig in and mobilise the armed forces to occupy the black areas, to act with the use of the gun rather than dialogue. We can expect a move away from the idea of negotiation if it ever meant anything, and towards more use of the big stick, both internally and against neighbouring countries.

**One of the new developments in the last two or three years is the way white business has started to talk to the ANC and to urge Botha to open negotiations. Beyond these verbal pressures from business, do you see any sign that white business is prepared to put on its own internal sanctions against Botha to force him to move? In any case, does it have the power to do that if it wanted to?**

Sections of white business might have that desire, but I do not believe they have sufficient political clout at the moment to do very much about it. By and large, the liberal sector of the power bloc has got no effective political constituency either among the white

community, nor the black community. Those forces within the white power bloc that are ready to go a little further are in limbo. They have no firm base with which to move in this direction. They are a hostage of the very forces which they helped historically to create to serve their earlier accumulation needs.

**On the black side there is a stated willingness to negotiate at some point. What are the minimum concessions that Botha – or the white establishment, however it turns out to be constituted at a later stage – would have to make in order for the ANC to be prepared to sit down and talk to it?**

It's become clear in the recent period, from the statements of Oliver Tambo and other ANC representatives, that the bottom line is that there must be an acceptance of the principle of majority rule in a unitary, democratic state. If there is a genuine acceptance of this principle, then there is much that can be tossed about, including constitutional mechanisms for safeguarding the rights of the individual, the relationship between private and social property, the kind of economic set-up during the interim period and questions connected with the language and cultural rights of the various groups. But there can be no compromise on the question of majority rule in a unitary state. That, of course, does not preclude a delegation of certain regional powers. We do not regard our emphasis on unitarism as a threat to the historically evolved cultural and linguistic heritage of the South African nation in the making. Mechanisms for ensuring this can also be talked about.

**What are the characteristics of the present phase of black resistance which mark it out**

**from earlier phases? And is this really the last phase? Is this 1917 or is it 1905, or perhaps something even earlier than that?**

The country has been in flames since about August 1984. In spite of the inevitable oscillations in the intensity of the upsurge, the momentum of resistance has, broadly speaking, sustained itself without any real abatement. And it looks like continuing to do so. Two psychological barriers have been permanently breached and this breach has transformed the situation.

On the side of the people there is no longer the centuries old feeling of impotence. They know now that it can be done and it will be done. And they are prepared to sacrifice life to do it. And when this happens a social force becomes unstoppable. This is what has happened in South Africa. On the side of the ruling power bloc and its support constituency in the white community, there is no longer the conviction, which was there for so many centuries, that they could hold on in the old way. They know they cannot hold on for very much longer. And when this happens to a ruling class it triggers off fragmentation, defections, in-fighting, and other symptoms of disintegration. There are the early signs of this happening in the ruling power bloc.

Now the resistance on the side of the people is being sustained by a combination of factors: the mood of confidence in the ultimate outcome, to which I've alluded; the mass organised forces which have emerged on the ground at community level, and regionally and nationally in powerful mass organisations such as the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) and the United Democratic Front (UDF); the increased strength of the ANC presence, including the ANC political underground; and the escalation in the recent period of armed blows which have had an enormous inspirational impact on the people, particularly the youth.

The question is: will it abate? I believe the signs are that it will not. There may well be moments, sooner or later, when less activity is visible as a result of the tightening of the regime's iron grip in this or that area. But it will inevitably burst forth again. Of course we should not underestimate the brutality, and the pure state terror power, that can still be unleashed by the regime. But this very process of attempting to deal with the situation by pure and escalating force can also become counterproductive for the regime.

The state, the economy, even the armed forces, cannot be run without the majority, and in the end you cannot govern in such conditions, in a permanent state of siege. The black ghettos which are being occupied are, in any case, the pools of labour for the white cities. They cannot be made to serve this purpose for too long by a policy of occupation, shooting, killing and maiming. Therefore there is a limit to the



regime's capacity to continue engaging in greater and greater terror against the people. The question is, where will it all lead to, what point is it going to reach? As far as we're concerned, it should lead to Pretoria. We are on the road. It may take time, but we are embarked on this journey in a completely new situation and a new context. Although the other side is by no means at the point of collapse and still has enormous resources to mobilise and sustain itself, the situation has within it the seeds of a much swifter transformation than we can imagine if we only assess the statistics of the current line-up. The situation is very volatile.

**Are there not also elements within the situation which could delay the process into the unforeseeable future? It's not like Iran or the Philippines where sections of the ruling group, and particularly the army and the police force, are beginning to lose heart in the exercise of repression. All the major power centres on the white side are still holding firm, as you said at the beginning. So what gives you such cause for confidence in the short term?**

Apartheid, as an extreme form of racism, has a momentum of its own. But its foundation is the privilege and material benefits which have accrued to most members of the dominant white community. The crisis that is occurring in South Africa – the resistance, and the internal and external economic consequences of that resistance – is threatening this foundation of racism.

Two responses are possible to it. One scenario is that there will be a fight to the death. The other is to make the best of a reality. I believe that if the people's pressure is sustained and also outside pressure is sustained, then less and less of the ruling power bloc and its white constituency will choose this first option of fighting to the death. What is being eroded in South Africa is the material foundation for apartheid.

**What about the armed forces?**

Even their armed power is becoming more and more dependent on the black forces. The majority of the police are black. The regime cannot substantially increase the size of the army without roping in black soldiers and black collaborators. They cannot run this country without the very objects of their domination. That is their dilemma.

**You've talked throughout as though the black majority is united, and clearly psychologically they are united against the concept of apartheid. But ethnically, sociologically, economically, there are divisions within the black majority which the government, in some cases subtly, in some cases brutally, is trying to open up and exploit. Are you confident that the black majority can be held together in the face of ethnic differences, the conflicts between generations, the conflicts between the black middle class and the black**

Joe Slovo: 'On the side of the people there is no longer the centuries old feeling of impotence'.

**unemployed township dwellers, between the so-called vigilantes and the comrades, and the enormous geographic separation of the black communities in large parts of the country which makes it hard for them to stay together?**

The events of the last two or three years have shown in general that the tendency is towards unity rather than division. The black population, nationally considered, has never been as united as it is today. There are certainly divisions. But there is no situation which attracts the unanimous support of even the class or group in whose interest the struggle is being waged. It would be unnatural. There are divisions, they do manifest themselves, and they do need to be taken seriously, because as the conflict heightens the demands of unity become more and more important, more and more imperative. But let us just remind ourselves – much of what is described as division is a result of direct enemy activity. For example, the conflict between the fathers and the comrades in the Crossroads area recently has demonstrated beyond any doubt that the regime created this mercenary group for the purpose of destroying the squatters camp.

**But it was successful.**

It is possible to hire mercenaries and be successful with arms and weapons. It doesn't prove mass support. It just proves that the police were able to create a group, prepare the way for them, stand on the sidelines, and if there was any danger, step in themselves. That's what happened at the Crossroads. This was clear from the press.

**But aren't you just accusing the regime of being unfair, which of course we know they are already? The fact is, a large number of blacks were prepared to collaborate with the police rather than with the squatter inhabitants.**

Yes. There are 20,000 black policemen who are collaborating with the regime. They are paid to do so. We are not suggesting that we have a population of saints, people who under all or any conditions will never move over to the other side. It's unreal. It's unnatural. It's never happened anywhere in any struggle.

Another example is the single men's hostel in Soweto, which houses the frustrated single Zulu workers who are from time to time unleashed on progressive sections of the population, based on reports which are given of anti-Zulu activity. The enemy has also infiltrated organisations like AZAPO, and under the t-shirts of AZAPO and other organisations of that sort, has begun to encourage political conflicts in the UDF. There is also an organisation like Inkatha, which has been virtually transformed into a paramilitary force which is serving the regime on every possible occasion.

We must also take account of differ-

ences based on ideological divisions. For example, there is a National Forum which competes with the United Democratic Front for mass allegiance. It doesn't believe the UDF goes far enough in the struggle for socialism, which the National Forum believes is a fundamental question even at this stage. Then there is the problem of competing trade union centres. COSATU could overnight be a million strong and not 600,000 strong, if some of the other trade union groupings like CUSA were to join. Yet in October of this year a competing federation has been formed under the name of CUSA/AZACTU.

**What are the tactics that have to be adopted at this stage in the struggle? Is it**



**predominantly a question of strengthening trade union organisation in order to move towards increasing strike action, possibly a general strike? Is it to try and firm up control within the townships, to prevent the police being able to enter them? Is it the question of the armed struggle? What is the relationship between these different forms of resistance at the moment? What is the leading edge of the resistance?**

Pressure has got to be maintained in all these areas because in a sense all these areas form one mosaic of struggle. But of course each of these sectors faces its own special task. For example, in the townships the fundamental task which faces activists is to maintain the black ghettos as virtual no-go areas for isolated policemen and collaborators. At the moment the regime has the power to occupy these areas, but not to govern them, and it can only have a presence there when it enters them in force. The people's committees and other embryonic institutions of popular power that have emerged, must obviously be consolidated in the face of these emergency conditions, and they must be spread. And of course it has become more and more vital because of the emergency and the way the enemy is dealing with these new popular forms for underground organisation to take a deeper root.

As far as the armed struggle is concerned, ways must be found to escalate it. That means the supply of weapons, the training of personnel and the strengthening of a people's army. Now that's got to come more and more

from inside the country. The forces are there on the ground. Thousands of young people have actually organised themselves into combat units. What is required at the moment is leadership and materials. But the elements are there. There's an army of thousands ready to respond and act in all the main black areas in the towns and villages.

Another aspect of the armed struggle is the need for combat to become even more visible not only in the black areas but also in the white areas. This is not a policy of attacks against civilians. But the average white has been completely unaware of the conflict which has been taking place in the black areas. The white soldiers go back after having done their dirty work to their white areas. It is important that people who have been the backbone of support for the regime and who have been living in relative security and safety in South Africa should now begin to fear what the future holds for them, as a result of action on our part against targets in the white areas.

**It sounds as though you are talking about a campaign of bombing in white civilian suburbs.**

Against enemy targets.

**What do you mean?**

Police stations, against economic installations.

**Supermarkets?**

Economic installations. I do not have in mind civilian-filled supermarkets as a legitimate target. We have not changed our policy towards civilians. It is not our policy to attack civilians as civilians. What we have changed is our approach to attacking genuine military targets. In the past we have been inhibited by the possibility that civilians might be injured as a result of an attack on a military target, and we are becoming less and less inhibited by that factor. In other words, we are not allowing the presence of civilians in the vicinity necessarily to prevent us from embarking upon an action against a genuine military installation or against a target which it is legitimate for us to attack as an armed force of a liberation movement.

**Until now you have never tried to assassinate top military or political leaders. Is that because of a lack of ability or because it wasn't part of your strategy?**

It's not been part of our strategy. We've not embarked upon a general policy of individual assassinations. People themselves have dealt in some of the black areas with policemen, with collaborators and informers, and we believe that what they are doing is in the interests of the just struggle in which we are engaged. But we don't believe in general that a struggle of the sort in which we are engaged depends upon the assassination of a particular political leader, or a particular commander or police chief.

I'm not saying that's never going to happen, but this is not the main thrust of our armed strategy. It is to engage and deal with the enemy's armed personnel, to weaken the economy by blows against important installations.

**You've been talking in a sense both as a member of the national executive of the ANC and as chairman of the South African Communist Party. What is the role of the party, given that many other liberation movements have been successful without the need for a separate party?**

The answer in one sentence is because there is a need in South Africa to work for the ultimate achievement of a socialist South Africa. And I emphasise the word *ultimate* because the main content of the immediate struggle is centred on what our programme describes as the national democratic revolution, which involves the winning of people's power based on the broad demands of the Freedom Charter.

In regard to these immediate objectives and the strategy and tactics connected with their achievement, there is broad agreement between the African National Congress and our party. We virtually think alike on the immediate needs of the struggle and where we are going and how to get there. More especially we both agree on the basic forces which have to be mobilised in this phase of the struggle, which involves the mobilisation of all classes and groups from among the nationally dominated majority.

But, despite this similarity of approach, we as a communist party have a special responsibility, both in relation to the immediate struggle and to our objective of socialism. We regard ourselves as the class party of the working people. And we have a special historic responsibility to ensure that this class, the working class, plays its rightful part in the alliance of class forces which the immediate struggle demands. It's necessary to ensure that the working class and its aspirations are not swamped by other social forces who may see liberation as consisting solely of replacing the white face by a black one in the seat of exploitation.

The ANC is an expression of the class alliance. It is a national movement embracing all classes and groups within and among the black oppressed, and is now even open to democrats among the whites who are prepared to make common cause with it. The ANC cannot, and should not, tie itself to the aspirations of that single class which we communists say we represent. And it is the party's function to assert and jealously safeguard the role of the working class in the alliance at this stage, not in some future millennium.

But apart from this there is still the socialist perspective, which although not on the immediate agenda of the struggle, cannot be filed away until the so-called first stage has been reached. As far as we are concerned as communists, there is no Chinese wall between

## The ANC Story

**1910:** South African act of union between British and Boers excludes all blacks from becoming MPs.

**1912:** Formation of ANC.

**1921:** Formation of South African Communist Party.

**1944-45:** ANC leads anti-pass campaigns.

**1948:** National Party comes to power. Apartheid becomes institutionalised.

**1950:** Banning of South African Communist Party.

**1955:** ANC launches Freedom Charter.

**1956:** 156 leaders of the ANC and its allies are arrested and charged with high treason.

**1960:** National anti-pass campaign. Sharpeville massacre. ANC declared illegal. State of emergency declared.

**1961:** All African Conference, led by Nelson Mandela. Country placed on a war footing to smash nationwide strikes. ANC goes underground. Organises acts of sabotage against government installations. Emergence of armed wing of the ANC.

**1962:** ANC leaders including Mandela captured and sentenced to life imprisonment.

**1967:** ZAPU and ANC guerrillas cross the Zambesi into Rhodesia.

**1969:** Morogoro Conference, ANC moves towards the idea of a revolutionary people's war.

**1972-73:** Student and trade union organisations formed, and engage in boycott and strike actions.

**1976:** Soweto massacre. 900 schoolchildren shot, in the biggest protest ever. Disturbances spread nationally.

**1984:** Beginning of the present unrest.

the first stage, so-called, and the second stage, so-called. The revolution is going to be a continuous process, and it is our task to make sure that even at this stage we continuously place before the working people the long-term perspectives of socialism, the vital connection between the whole concept of national liberation and social emancipation.

**Its detractors say that the party is predominantly white, predominantly exiled, and predominantly made up of people of the older generation who were active in South Africa before the party was put**

**underground and made illegal. How true is that?**

Both the ANC and the party, after the destruction of their internal organisation in the post-Rivonia period, were for a time predominantly exiles. What we have today inside the country, as far as both the ANC and the party are concerned, was rebuilt from exile. This is a process which I believe has been the experience of most movements which have gone through periods of fascist repression, where the leadership has had to move outside for the purpose of reconstructing and reorganising. It is certainly what has happened in South Africa.

Today, inside the country the party's presence is evident in all kinds of ways. I think people here watching television have seen in the past year or two how, on most of the occasions when the mass of people get together, the flag of the party is raised beside that of the ANC. This is not a fortuitous happening. It is some kind of evidence of communists and their influence. Our underground presence continues to grow.

As far as the social composition of the party is concerned, it is not true that it is dominated by minority groups. The party's leadership and rank and file reflects the social composition of South African society. The overwhelming majority of our central committee and political bureau is black. And this is the position with the vast bulk of the members among the workers and among the youth who have joined us since 1976 in the post-Soweto situation.

**Historically the party has had close links with the Soviet Communist Party. But recently you led a delegation for the first time to China. What is the political significance of that?**

I think it is a positive event in the sense that two parties, our party and the Chinese party, which for so long have had no relationship at all, have reached a point where they can get round a table together as comrades, to discuss and exchange views about the situation in China and the situation in South Africa on the basis of complete independence and respect for one another's views.

**What has been the impact of the tremendous upsurge of black resistance in South Africa on the rest of Africa?**

It has sharpened their understanding of who their international allies are, and it has sharpened their appreciation of the true character of Western imperialism. In other words, it's had a radicalising effect on many states and top leaders in Africa. For example, it's had a most important effect on someone like Nyerere. The realisation is slowly dawning on those who might have doubted it in the past that there is no way of achieving real independence, real national sovereignty in Africa, without the elimination of the minority regime in South Africa.

Now although at the back of their minds a lot of African leaders obvious-

**'There's an army of thousands ready to respond and act in all the main black areas in the towns and villages'**



ly in the past had an inkling that that might be so, the events of the past three years have demonstrated beyond any doubt that there is no short-cut for them on the question of, not just our future, but their own future in relation to South Africa. So long as this regime continues to maintain its grip on our country, there will be no peace and no stability; there will be no possibility of a free choice of social system by any of these countries, certainly those on the borders and within the sub-continent.

South Africa is, after all, being used by those who have decided long ago that Angola and Mozambique must basically be destroyed because of their choice of a socialist path. In both cases we know what enormous damage has been caused and what enormous anguish has resulted for the majority of the people by the action of South Africa in creating, sustaining and supplying mercenary groups, and from time to time going in themselves and bombing, killing and destroying.

**What has been the impact of the years of independence in Angola, Mozambique and Zimbabwe on your view of the struggle in terms of the type of society, the priorities and the tactics which you would adopt after winning power?**

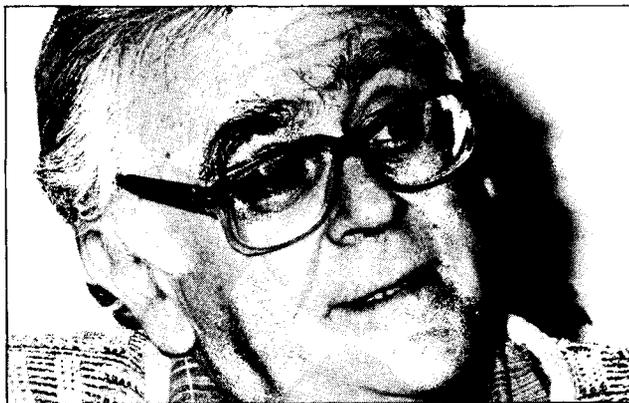
I'm sure there are things that can be learnt. The Angolans and the Mozambicans themselves have begun to learn from their own experiences and mistakes, as we all do. I believe that one of the clichés we must avoid about a future South Africa is the one that is so easily thrown about by the far Left in our conditions, of the immediate leap forward into an egalitarian socialist millenium as the immediate consequence of the destruction of the racist state.

We are going to face the most enormous economic complexities in South Africa, which will require a really delicate balance to be achieved between a number of imperatives. Among those imperatives is the need to begin to change the relations of production while continuing to supply the people with their daily needs and ensuring that the economy does not fall into chaos.

These two imperatives are not always harmonious ones, although ultimately they are. But we know from the experience not just of Angola and Mozambique, but from most socialist countries, that the inheritors of power have of necessity to utilise the skills, the techniques, the collaboration even, of those who have previously been class enemies, because by virtue of their talents, they can help to prevent serious economic dislocation. While many of them will remain enemies and cannot be used, I believe that in our situation in particular, with a relatively advanced sector within the economy, there will be a great need to ensure the involvement of those who have shed the racism of the past, and who are prepared to come over on to the side of

the people, in order to help maintain a certain rhythm without which chaos will result.

This implies that I don't believe we can envisage the possibility of sudden socialisation of all the means of production, and the abolishing of private enterprise at all levels. I believe there will be a mixed economy in the post-liberation period, in which in particular the black middle class, and small black bourgeoisie, will come into their own in the sense that they it will have a very important role to play as supporter of the liberation struggle in helping to build the economy, to ensure that we are able to cope with the demands of the people. But it is equally clear that a people's government must take charge of the country's resources



and cannot shirk the task of a major redistribution of wealth, especially as far as the monopoly sector is concerned.

**Putting it simply, you're suggesting that Zimbabwe is closer to the model you expect to follow than either Angola or Mozambique?**

The model Zimbabwe followed was the model imposed on Zimbabwe in the Lancaster House talks. I'm not sure they would have followed precisely that model...

**I'm talking about the economic strategy adopted in Zimbabwe rather than the voting mechanisms.**

I wouldn't like to make that comparison. We are going to have our own model. In a sense, I don't believe in simply following models.

**I know there are diplomatic issues involved, appearing to criticise Zimbabwe or whatever, but I think it is an illuminating way of suggesting the sort of priorities and economic strategy you would like to adopt, and what the pitfalls are that you can learn from other countries.**

Yes, certainly we ought to study the Zimbabwe model a little more. I can't say I'm an expert on what's going on there. One thing that is certain in our conditions is that we will have to satisfy the urge for land without destroying the large rural industrial complexes, which are really massive rural factories. The redistribution of the land is the absolute imperative in our conditions,

the fundamental national demand. It will have to be done, even if it involves some economic cost, in order to continue to mobilise the people whose support has brought the democratic forces to power.

So it's a rather complex sort of chemistry - it's not just a matter of what is statistically right and what is theoretically right. It also depends very much on how we come to power. Are there going to be liberated areas? Which forces are going to play what role? It happens in every real revolution. One can make a few general remarks like I have made, which are pretty obvious in our situation, but that's about it.

**Let's end by talking about the role of international pressure, sanctions and boycotts. How important are these things beyond the purely psychological dimension of indicating international support?**

Every struggle has an international dimension. The impact of outside solidarity on the eventual ending of the Vietnam intervention is still fresh in our memories. In the case of apartheid, external pressure has a build-up potential which is perhaps unique because it is an issue which cuts across the world ideological divide. I don't think it is unrealistic to imagine an escalation of economic isolation to a point which effectively contributes to a change of direction by our ruling circles with less blood-letting than we can otherwise expect. I have already mentioned the relation between apartheid as an ideology and its roots in super-profits and the economic flesh-pots which most whites have enjoyed.

Limited as it still is, the reaction of Western capital has already had a damaging effect on most parts of the economy. Measures recently taken by giants like General Motors to withdraw from their operations in South Africa will obviously add to the trauma facing our captains of industry. If I could transpose an aphorism connected with General Motors, it undoubtedly follows that what's bad for Botha and his support base is good for us.

Our experience has been that when people outside take even the smallest action against apartheid, it has an enormous inspirational impact. When you face an enemy as strong as ours, the feeling that it can be challenged is very much reinforced by the feeling that you are not alone, that the world is on your side. I remember in the early sixties how inspired all of us inside the country were when British dockers refused to handle a South African cargo on one occasion. Of course, the non-delivery of some crates of Outspan oranges won't, on its own, be the end of the world for the South African economy. But it has an inordinate impact on the resolve of those who count and the Mandelas and others fighting inside where the ultimate battle against apartheid will be won. ●