

Southern Africa

THE AFRICAN PEOPLE SAY 'NO!'

Alan Brooks

SIR Alec Douglas Home and Ian Smith tried very hard to leave Rhodesia's five million Africans out of their 'settlement' scheme. No black man was party to the lengthy negotiations which led up to the constitutional formula adopted. Virtually no black man stands to gain any personal advantage from the implementation of the proposals, and the African people in general will be much worse off if the settlement goes through. No genuine consultation of African opinion (e.g. by referendum, after open debate with the African nationalist parties freely participating) was wanted by Smith and Home, and none is being allowed to take place, as the whole world has seen from the shooting of dozens of Africans, the arrest of hundreds, and the restrictions upon the activities of the African National Council, all of which has been happening under the nose of the now utterly discredited Pearce Commission.

Yet the African people refused to be left out. They grasped the meagre opportunity offered by the release of some (by no means all) leaders, took the test of acceptability at its face value and in a great upsurge of united opposition cried out an uncompromising, unmistakable 'NO!' to the designs of British imperialism.

Meanwhile, some thousand miles to the west, an equally militant, determined, and profoundly significant struggle was being waged by the people of Namibia (South West Africa), in particular by the Ovambo workers. In December for the first time in the history of the country, and for the first time under the apartheid regime since the 1961 stay-at-home in South Africa, a massive general strike was launched against Vorster's hated rule. The immediate cause of this heroic achievement was the contract labour system which kept the men of Ovamboland as a sub-proletariat—forced to sell their labour by their landlessness and rural poverty, and to sell it to a single agent of the employers, the South West Africa Native Labour Association, which with government backing maintained a system of convict-type forced labour. Wages of £10-£12 a month, 12-18 month separation of men from their families, and appalling working conditions were the price the workers paid for the super-exploitation

of their labour. They had—and still have—no trade union rights or political rights whatsoever.

The deeper cause of the Namibian strike, which both generalised it beyond the ranks of the Ovambo workers (who form 70 per cent of the labour force) and escalated it quickly from an industrial struggle to a broad political struggle, was the continued domination of Namibia by the South African regime in defiance of local and world opinion and international law. The strike paralysed the country, and lasted over six weeks. It exposed the falsity of the Vorster regime's claims, embarrassed it internationally, demonstrated the political maturity of the Namibian people and inspired millions of oppressed people throughout southern Africa. It hardly needs to be added that both these massive 'NOES'—to the Home-Smith betrayal and the South African domination of Namibia—took place in the face of vastly superior force and naked repression. There were marginal limitations on the authorities in both cases: the need for Ian Smith to appear to comply with the vague requirement of 'normal political activities', and the South African Government's concern to establish the legitimacy of its annexation of South West Africa before the bar of world opinion, especially since last summer's adverse ruling of the World Court at the Hague. Both limitations were soon overridden by the more basic desire of both regimes to preserve white supremacy at all costs. Thus the Smith regime has killed and imprisoned far more people since the beginning of December than in the whole of the preceeding eighteen months, and most released detainees are back behind bars. And in northern Namibia the South African army moved in at the end of January, clerical critics were silenced and the press totally excluded, while on the other side of the border, in Angola, Portuguese troops were deployed to terrorise the local people. (The Ovambos live on both sides of the border.) Latest reports indicate that, although some strikers have gone back, many are staying out, and the struggle has turned into an armed uprising in the northern bush.

Meanwhile on the eastern flank of southern Africa's battleground, in the Tete province of Mozambique, FRELIMO harassment of the Cabora Bassa project has been stepped up significantly, while last year's attempts by the Portuguese army to crush the liberation movement in the two northern provinces have been decisively defeated*. And in the heartland of white supremacy, South Africa,

* For an excellent, detailed account of the dangerous Cabora Bassa Dam project see *Cabora Bassa and the Struggle for Southern Africa*, World Council of Churches, 40 pp., 15p.

popular resistance to apartheid—symbolised by the brave Indian school-teacher Ahmed Timol, who was murdered by the security police in October—has been welling up more widely and openly in recent months than at any time in the past eight years.

Illumined by these beacons of anti-imperialist struggle, the Heath government stands nakedly exposed, its policies threadbare and disastrous. Even if the Pearce Commission returns with a dishonest unbelievable 'Yes'—a possibility by no means to be ruled out—the Anglo-Rhodesian deal will largely have failed. The failure can be made complete if the British labour movement matches the clamorous 'NO' of the African peoples with its own united 'NO'. *No* to the Cabora Bassa Dam, *No* to Heath's alliance with the Vorster regime, and *No* to the impending abandonment of sanctions against Rhodesia and recognition of the illegal Smith regime. When the Conservative Government came to power, it launched itself into the sale of arms to Vorster only to be shocked, checked and all but blocked by the pressure of Commonwealth and domestic progressive opinion. As a result, arms for apartheid is a policy which has had to be virtually shelved for the past year. Today the same widespread mobilisation of the labour movement is demanded by the squalid Rhodesia betrayal.

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It is as dangerous to base a policy solely on the conditions of the present depression as on the abnormal opportunities of the war period and the years immediately following it. Action must, of course, be modified in the light of changing conditions; but we have now the materials on which to base a policy taking account both of depression and of inflation in trade, both of abnormal unemployment and of actual labour shortage.

Such a policy, it seems to me, must in nowise leave out of account the prospect of considerable 'pre-revolutionary' gains, or of important encroachments on the capitalist control of industry in advance of the actual overthrow of the capitalist system. Certainly, as long as capitalism maintains its ultimate power in society, these advances can only be limited and, in a sense, negative; and certainly no mere accumulation of them can carry with it the change from capitalism to workers' control. They are not the capture of the citadel of capitalism, but the occupation of outposts in its territory, valuable to some extent in themselves, but more as affording both a means of hampering the operations of the enemy, and a favourable base for more decisive operations.

(From 'A Word to the Engineers', by G. D. H. Cole,
Labour Monthly, March 1922)