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DETROIT TO DURBAN: BLACK WORKERS' COMMON STRUGGLE

by

Black Workers Organising Committee
Oakland: United Front Press
22 pages, illustrated, \$.25, 1973

SOUTHERN AFRICA/BLACK AMERICA: SAME STRUGGLES, SAME FIGHT

by

Bill Sales
Harlem: Black Liberation Press
72 pages, illustrated, bibliography, \$1.00, 1977

The parallels between South African Apartheid and the treatment of Afro-Americans in the United States ought to be too obvious to need enumerating. The *whites only* signs, the *outside communist agitator* explanations for revolt, and the religious justifications for inequality are very familiar to Americans. Even the notorious pass laws have their parallels in Southern slave control systems. The shock of seeing the same overt racist ideology often confuses both Black and White American radicals.

Some radicals treat South Africa as if it were a microcosm of the United States. They think the Black workers should unite with the White workers to overthrow the bosses who are exploiting both. Such an analysis ignores the *absence* of a poor white class in South Africa. Job reservation ensures white wage workers the best, usually supervisory, jobs. Domestic servants have become a universal feature of white households in South Africa.

White workers in the United States have always had to compete with Black Workers in the job market. So many poor white racists have fled to South African job reservation that some racist groups have called for racists to stay in the United States, lest the U.S. "abandon" South Africa. The conditions for an inter-racial class revolution are woefully lacking in South Africa.

Some Black American radicals see killing all the whites as the simple solution to Southern Africa's problems. This sort of attitude led many to applaud the nationalist, anti-assimilationist rhetoric of UNITA in Angola. Not surprisingly, they wound up on the same side as South Africa in the Angolan

civil war.

These two pamphlets avoid such pitfalls, but provide some misinformation of their own. Each makes a sincere attempt to explain the differences between the South African and American situations. Each has a few flaws.

The earliest pamphlet is *Detroit to Durban*. Although published in 1973 much of its information is still correct. It first describes the apartheid society in terms which suggest the U.S. parallels. Then the role of U.S. corporations, especially the auto companies, in propping up apartheid after Sharpeville is explained. The pamphlet is written for workers, not intellectuals. Its explanation of capitalist expansion is easily understood and accurate.

Unfortunately, the parallel between the Durban strikes of early 1973 and the Detroit riots of 1967 is a bit strained. In Durban African workers peacefully struck and demonstrated. Although brutally repressed, they managed to shut down large sections of the South African economy and to win important wage increases for themselves.

In Detroit neither the Black nor the White automobile workers could shut down the auto plants alone. Instead of a peaceful strike and demonstration by Black workers, the Detroit rebellion was the desperate struggle of those who have been forced to become Capitalism's *reserve army of the unemployed*. The role of job discrimination and welfare in getting Black and White workers to see each other as enemies is ignored in the pamphlet. Thus the essential differences between the class and race situations in South Africa and the United States are passed over in favor of an emotional appeal to Black solidarity. Ironically, though the pamphlet is addressed to Black workers, many of the suggestions for solidarity activities require the cooperation of all the workers.

Southern Africa/Black America is a more recent publication of the 'anti-revisionist' left. It reflects the analysis and rhetoric of those who followed China in the sixties only to come into conflict with such Chinese policies of the seventies as support for a coalition government in Angola. A short glossary is provided for some of the more obscure Marxist terms.

Despite the heavy rhetoric, the pamphlet provides a cogent analysis of the Southern African situation, particularly in its economic analysis of South Africa's attempt at detente, its class analysis of the Angolan liberation movements, and its analysis of the role of white wage earners in supporting apartheid. Almost everyone can learn something from this pam-

phlet.

Unfortunately some facts are ignored or distorted. In pointing out the very high rate of return on American investments in South Africa, the author ignores the even higher rate of return on investments in tropical Africa. The sincere (if economically motivated) opposition to apartheid by such large capitalists as Harry Oppenheimer is likewise ignored. Apartheid is ultimately explained as an attempt by South African capital to bribe white workers into supporting the system. In fact, job reservation, the core of apartheid, is an attempt by white workers to preserve their own privileged position by excluding Black competition from certain job categories. Any analysis which ignores the natural, negative reaction of large capital to this situation is, of necessity, incomplete. Thus the statement "...imperialism needs a white dominated Southern Africa" (p.1) is false and misleading. Imperialism doesn't really care about the color of the exploited as long as profits keep rolling in. More profits could actually be earned if job reservation were scrapped.

The most *valuable* part of this pamphlet is the explanation of the need for Black Americans to support the struggle in South Africa. Not only must South African racism be smashed to remove a major ideological support for racism at home, but imperialist superexploitation anywhere hurts the living standards of all workers in the U.S. Job export is the most visible example of this. The struggle of the United Mine Workers against the importation of South African coal is a case in point. One cannot criticise this pamphlet for not doing something it didn't intend to do, but there is also a need for a pamphlet to tell white workers in America why *they* should support the South African struggle.

John Philips

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