

4029831

08000

Red Tide

South Africans Revive Marx—Even as Some Learn That He's Dead

Legalization of Communism Comes at an Ironic Time, But Converts Are Legion

Some Disdain for East Europe

By ROGER THURLOW
Staff Reporter

SOWETO, South Africa—Enock Ngcobo lives in a little house on Karl Marx Street in a neighborhood unofficially called Karl Marx Section. At a political rally in a vast soccer stadium, he sits under a huge red banner proclaiming his area of the grandstand to be Karl Marx Zone.

So, what does Mr. Ngcobo think of what has become of Karl Marx lately?

"I wouldn't know," he says. "I don't know him personally."

The 19-year-old student, a newly enlisted communist, scans the crowd of 50,000 people rallying for the African National Congress. "Karl Marx must be here somewhere. You must ask around."

Karl Marx himself didn't make the rally. ("He's dead?" sputters Mr. Ngcobo.) But his restless ghost is here, all right.

"Realize socialism," urges the scribbling on a miner's hard hat. "Build the workers' vanguard," encourages a banner draped across some scaffolding. "Long Live the South African Communist Party," prays the pin of an old man.

Untarnished Appeal

They may be tearing up the Communist Manifesto in Eastern Europe and in some African countries north of here. But on the continent's southern tip, where communists are no longer banned, the working class is just beginning to discover Karl Marx. Or at least they think they are.

"I know Karl Marx," offers a man sitting next to Mr. Ngcobo. "He's a South African, isn't he? But can you tell me, is Karl Marx white or black?"

When Pretoria last February ended its 40-year ban on the South African Communist Party, known as the SACP, it reckoned that the crumbling of communism elsewhere would soon discredit the party here. Instead, communists have been streaming back from exile and coming out of the closet internally to organize Africa's largest industrialized working class, which has remained largely oblivious to the changes in the rest of the world.

On factory floors, in the mines and throughout the simmering, overcrowded black townships, workers talk of the two-phase revolution: first, black liberation from white domination, and then the creation of a thoroughly socialist state. The view from here is that it is apartheid—and its perceived cohort in racial oppression, capitalism—that has failed, not communism. In fact, through its long revolutionary alliance with the African National Congress, the main black liberation group, the SACP is more popular now than when it was banned.

"The working class in Eastern Europe is confused," says Moses Mayekiso. "I worry about [the Polish people] reversing all the revolutionary gains."

Mr. Mayekiso is a top official in one of South Africa's largest black unions, the National Union of Metalworkers. He is also on the SACP's leadership committee. Several years ago, in between stints in jail for his anti-apartheid activism, Mr. Mayekiso went to Poland to attend a Solidarity trade-union conference. He couldn't believe his working-class ears.

"I found it difficult for workers to say they want a free-market system without qualifying it in any way. When I hear this, then I must say 'These people don't know what they want.'" Mr. Mayekiso says. "They will burn their fingers quickly on capitalism. They will realize there is unemployment and poverty."

The 40-year-old unionist gives his beard a troubled tug. It was Poland's state bureaucracy that "demoralized the workers, and they have run to an extremist alternative," says Mr. Mayekiso, who grew up reading the banned works of Marx and Lenin and now rigidly quotes them. "They should democratize socialism, rather than kiss Thatcherism."

This is the South African communist's answer to the realities of Eastern Europe: It isn't communism that failed, but the way it was implemented. The SACP, once one of the most Stalinist of the world's communist fraternalities, has undergone its own *perestroika* and now favors multiparty democracy, regular elections, independent unions and enough elements of free enterprise to keep foreign investors interested. They call this "scientific socialism." But their goal is the same as ever, to enter government through the alliance with the ANC and then work to establish a proletarian paradise where the workers will control everything, from investment decisions to production planning.

Uncle Joe

Joe Slovo, the pudgy and avuncular head of the SACP, has certainly been on a roll ever since he returned wearing red socks from three decades in exile. Once described by a local pundit as a cross between Joseph Stalin and Santa Claus, Mr. Slovo was acting more like a comedian one night at a political talk show in a Johannesburg nightclub:

There's this man, see, who is being beaten up by a policeman. He shouts, "Stop! Stop! I'm an anti-communist." But the policeman continues hitting him. "I don't care," says the cop, "what kind of bloody

Please Turn to Page 2, Column 3

430. D4. 20.4

South Africans Revive Marx—Even as Some Learn That He's Dead

Continued From First Page
communist you are."

Mr. Slovo, a 64-year-old white lawyer who was born in Lithuania, joins the audience in laughing at his joke, and then adds, "To be a communist in this country takes more than a sense of humor."

... It takes a sense of survival."

White, capitalist South Africa pokes fun at the survival of communism here. The SACP, says satirist Pieter-Dirk Uys, is "the only communist party in the world with a plan for the future." One newspaper editor refers to Mr. Slovo as "the last Lithuanian communist."

But many restless young blacks see Mr. Slovo and the Communist Party as upholding the revolutionary edge of the ANC-SACP alliance. While top ANC leaders who aren't communists, such as Nelson Mandela, have been striking a more moderate pose, those leaders who also belong to the SACP, particularly the commanders of the ANC's military wing, continue to rattle the revolutionary sabres.

"We can't go to sleep just because we have been unbanned," says Jeremy Cronin. "We need to keep on promoting socialism." Mr. Cronin, a mild-mannered white poet, burrowed into the SACP underground during his university days. He was arrested and jailed for seven years, and then went into exile. Now 40, he directs the party's education efforts.

Speaking before 1,000 students at Johannesburg's University of the Witwatersrand, he nimbly parries hostile questions about communism's shortcomings by ticking off a list of African countries where, he implies, capitalism has built societies that are far less than perfect. Most of the audience loves it, particularly when he asks what capitalism has done to improve the lot of South Africa's working class.

"He's right," says Freddie Mokhachane, a 24-year-old black student. "Capitalism may succeed in the U.S. and Germany, but I know what I know. My father has worked for 20 years in a factory and has nothing, not even a house. Now, is that successful capitalism?"