

## THE AGRARIAN PROBLEM

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From: An address to the Society of Young Africa, May, 1954. (SOYA is affiliated to the Unity Movement and consists mainly of young urban workers and intellectuals.)

Some of you may have come here expecting an exposition of the day-to-day problems and difficulties of the peasantry on the land. But I do not intend to deal with them to-day. Let us deal with the fundamentals. We have first to understand the nature of the problem itself. Many people engage in politics without having a clear idea of where they are going. They have no fundamental theses to serve as a touchstone in all their activities, to use as a test of the correctness of their lines of action. Quite often they throw themselves enthusiastically into some activity, only to find that at the end of it all they are further off than ever from their goal. Lacking a clear understanding of the problem, and therefore a clear policy, they live <sup>a</sup> hand-to-mouth existence, veering now towards the policy of one group and now towards another. Such people are prone to indulge in one venture after another, leading to the inevitable result - frustration, despondency and disillusionment. Thus it is important for us at the outset to have an overall picture of the problem before us, the forces at our disposal, the method of struggle and our goal.

There are two main problems that lie before us and require immediate solution. They are the agrarian problem and the national problem. It is our task to examine them and show their interconnection. The one is intimately related to the other and their solutions are likewise closely linked together.

First of all, let us examine the distribution of the population and the type of work the people are engaged in. South Africa is still predominantly an agrarian country. The bulk of the population is to be found on the land engaged in agriculture. But the overwhelming majority of the people are African peasants, who own no land at all. Thus the problem for this country is the land or agrarian problem. To see our problem in all its acuteness, let us look into the distribution of the land. With the exception of 2,071,551 urbanised Africans living in locations (segregated city slums: Ed.), The rest are peasant in character, notwithstanding the fact that they are forced to go and seek work in the towns for shorter or longer periods. On the white farms the number of Africans employed as labourers is 2,528,214. These live in virtual serfdom. The remaining 3,935,576 are over-crowded in the "Reserves". It must be borne in mind that out of the so-called urbanised Africans fully one third are miners living in (segregated) compounds. They are migrant labourers, <sup>that is,</sup> ~~this is~~ peasant<sup>s</sup> recruited under contract for limited periods and living apart from their families.

According to the statistics in a government paper, every white man, woman or child in the rural areas owns on the average 177 morgen of land, while every African in the Reserves occupies (not owns) on the average  $2\frac{1}{2}$  morgen. And this is not the whole picture; for all the Africans in the

towns and on the farms are by law regarded as living there temporarily only for as long as they are employed, since their home is presumed to be in the Reserves.

The agricultural census figures are illuminating. They show not only the poverty of the Blacks as compared with the Whites, but also the poverty of a large section of the Whites in the rural areas as against the few rich farmers in whose hands the bulk of the land is concentrated. (Details of census omitted. Ed.) The figures make it clear that the fundamental problem in this country is the agrarian problem. Furthermore, they reveal an important fact that must not be lost sight of, namely, that a section of the white farming population suffers from land-hunger. It is <sup>in</sup> their real interest to have an equitable redistribution of the land. And in fact land-hunger cuts across the colour pattern. This brings us face to face with the real and fundamental divisions in society, namely, the rich and the poor. All colour divisions in this or any other sphere are a superimposition calculated to blur the real dividing line of classes and to reinforce it.

The agrarian problem is not the only one facing us. We have also National <sup>p</sup>Oppression. The Non-Whites are without political rights; they are excluded from parliament. All legislative, executive and judicial power is in the hands of the small minority of Whites, who use this power for the domination of the Blacks in order to facilitate their exploitation. Thus all the Non-Whites are nationally oppressed. The two problems are interconnected and their solutions are bound together.

Let us now examine the consequences of the appalling distribution of land. From the outset I shall state categorically that landlessness

is an instrument for economic exploitation and national oppression. It is the cornerstone of the whole economic edifice of South Africa.

From landlessness flows a train of evils - the migratory labour system, which sends the African like a shuttlecock from the starving Reserves to the mines and back again; the forced labour system on the farms; and depressed wages in every sphere. We must not be deceived by those who shed crocodile tears over the evils of migratory labour and suggest all sorts of palliatives to alleviate the lot of the black man. Such people are either well-meaning fools or hypocrites who would pour ointment on a cancerous sore. They tinker with the superficial effects of the evil without ever getting down to the core. We must know that no amount of talk or goodwill can ever induce any herrenvolk (ruling class) government in South Africa to alter the distribution of land in order to relieve the position of the black man. Land shortage is necessary and fundamental to the whole economic structure of South Africa. The oppressed and exploited people alone can and will alter that situation.-----

Ed's. Note: The speaker demonstrates how the system of racial legislation channels African landless peasants into the white farms and the mines. (see also Chapter <sup>3</sup> Section <sup>4</sup>.)

As a result of this dammed up African labour there have arisen certain characteristic features in the South African economy. The main feature is the great gap between the wages of the unskilled and the skilled workers. In this country this means the gap between the black workers and the white labour aristocracy, which has an exclusive monopoly of skilled jobs. The ratio of skilled to unskilled wages over the whole

range of industries is 4 to 1. In the mining industry, taking all types of mining, it is 8 to 1, but in the Witwatersrand gold mines the ratio is 10 to 1. In South Africa super-exploitation is made possible because all political power is in the hands of the employing section and all Non-Whites are without political rights. It is possible, also, because of the acute land-hunger of a whole people herded into the Reserves.

When we have understood the underlying motive for all the oppressive legislation and administrative measures against the Non-Whites, it becomes clear to us what our attitude must be. It becomes obvious that no amount of pottering with them or improving them will alter the fundamental position. Those who want to improve these laws are our enemies; for they, in effect, want to perpetuate the status quo. Our demand is for the total abolition of all discriminatory laws, a full and equal franchise, an equitable redistribution of the land for all men and women: irrespective of colour, religious creed or "race." Anybody who falls short of these demands must be seen as an enemy who wants to come close to us in order the better to divert the struggle from its purpose.

Let me repeat once more; the agrarian problem is the fundamental problem in this country. It is the pivot and axis of the national movement. The intellectuals and petty shopkeepers must be made to realise that the agrarian problem is their problem. Whoever flounders on the agrarian question is lost. Such a man will inevitably attempt to lead the movement into the swamps of opportunism. We must guard the movement against such individuals.

Our immediate objective is to create a machinery that will be capable of measuring up to the gigantic task of re-organising the whole

of the political and economic structure of South Africa in such a way that the people are assured of getting Land and Freedom. This means that we have to set the whole of society into motion. This is a mighty task. The question is: how is it to be done? What is the political programme necessary for this purpose? And what is the organisational structure most suited to the task? There is a direct connection between the programme and the form of organisation.

We already have our programme, the Ten-Point Programme. Its first point is a demand for full and equal franchise. Point seven demands the abolition of serfdom and the right of every citizen to acquire land anywhere in the country and to live wherever he chooses.

What we need is to work out a method of putting this programme into action. We have to link up the agrarian aspirations with the national aspirations. We have to arouse the peasantry throughout the country through their demand for land. In order to draw the landless peasantry into the movement we must unreservedly throw in our lot with them in their struggle for their right to the land. At the same time we must teach them that the national, i.e., the political question is the key to the solution of their problems. In the given conditions of South Africa these two questions are inseparably bound together. For the landless peasantry are by and large the same people who are nationally oppressed without any political rights. The two problems must be solved together.

On the question of the form of organisation, we have already evolved the structure which we consider the most suitable for the task. If we think of gearing the whole of society into motion, we must find channels that will penetrate all the layers of society.. No single political party

can carry out this tremendous task. As we know, there are in existence numerous little organisations representing many different interests at all levels. Each one works in isolation from the rest. Our task is to get to the people through these organisations and draw them into the main stream of struggle. We have to give these organisations a new political content, and that content is the Ten-Point Programme. By these means we can unite the population; the organisations in the country will unite with the organisations in the towns. We shall then be able to build a truly national organisation which will reflect the aspirations of the country as a whole. What I would like to bring home to you is the magnitude of the task confronting us. We must not think in terms of our own little local organisations. We must learn to think in terms of the movement as a whole. In all our activities we must continually keep before us the larger issues involved. Whatever we do must be calculated to bring nearer the solution of the agrarian problem and the national problem. This means Land and Liberty for the people.

#### NON-COLLABORATION IN ACTION

*Editors note*) At the 1946 National Conference of the Unity Movement, Tabats, after reviewing the national situation and moving a resolution for the adoption of the policy of non-collaboration, said:

"It is the duty of Conference to give directives that are in line with the Ten-Point Programme. The Conference should adopt the policy of non-collaboration with the oppressors. Let us make a clean break with the past, cut the umbilical cord that ties us to the oppressor and wrench off the intellectual and political influences of the herrenvolk

which have so long dominated us. Let our policy be non-collaboration with the oppressors in our fight for full democratic rights."

Subsequently he stated: "This policy provides a sharp line of demarcation between the genuine fighters for liberation and the many compromisers and opportunists, the wolves in sheepskins." Ed.

#### PEASANTS USE BOYCOTT WEAPON

"With the challenge of the boycott we opened up a new era of struggle."

From The Awakening of a People, Chapter 9.

Having defined its tasks and formulated its programme, the Convention was in a position to carry its new policy to the masses. The reaction of the people was a measure of how well it had given expression to their needs. Years of bitter hardship and deep disillusionment had convinced them that their old leaders had <sup>led</sup> ~~led~~ them into a political swamp. With a perception sharpened by experience they recognised that the new policy answered their needs and aspirations. This did not mean that they fully understood what the new road of struggle would involve. They had to learn the meaning of the new policy in the day-to-day struggles. Concretely it meant in practical politics the application of the policy of non-collaboration.

In 1945 the African people in the Reserves were presented with what was called the Rehabilitation Scheme., described by the Secretary for Native affairs as "Ensuring a better life for the inhabitants (peasants) in the future". The Convention <sup>published</sup> a pamphlet, The Rehabilitation Scheme: a New Fraud, which places the Scheme against the background of the whole "Native Policy" of the rulers, with its system of laws for the regimentation of African labour. The people themselves did not find it



difficult to realise that when the scheme had been put into full operation, many families would be landless and driven out of the places of their birth...The root of all this destitution of man, of beast and of the soil itself was land hunger.

The majority of the people of the Transkei — where the scheme was first applied — opposed it. The acceptance of the scheme by the Bunga (council of chiefs) more than anything else opened their eyes to the function of these institutions in collaborating with the government. By this time the leading organisations in the Transkei were members of the All-African Convention. They took the opportunity of explaining to the people that segregatory institutions like the Bunga should be rejected, not only because they had accepted this particular scheme but because they are foreign to a democratic system of government. They were part of the system of trusteeship and in this sense were instruments of oppression.

The resentment of the people mounted as the Rehabilitation Scheme was more and more applied. All over the Reserves the people resisted with a stubbornness which was new and all the more significant coming from the section of the population which was traditionally regarded as the most backward. In the Transkei ~~and~~ <sup>the</sup> Amaxesibe, in the district of Mount Ayliff near Pondoland, threatened to take up arms in defence of their stock. The majority of the people, too, repudiated those chiefs who had accepted the Scheme. They held meetings in the hills under their newly-formed organisation, the Kongo. The following year a member of the Convention was arrested and charged with inciting the peasants against the Rehabilitation Scheme. In Pondoland the people were strong in their protest against their chief, <sup>while</sup> the surrounding villages totally rejected the Scheme....

In the Middledrift and Debenek districts in the Ciskei a number of villages repudiated the claim that they had accepted the Scheme and strenuously resisted its imposition. A number of arrests were made. In some villages the people formed their own People's Committees and collected money for the defence of the arrested men. All over the country resistance goes stubbornly on. It is a grim fight whose story has still to be told.

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