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Social Basis of Nationalist Party Power

Part of a lecture given before 1967 by Basil February (under pseudonym Paul Paterson) to members of his unit of Umkhonto we Sizwe (underground organization of the ANC). Printed in Sechaba, VI, 7, July 1972.

For any political party to achieve and to maintain political power, it must have the support of the majority of the electorate. In a democratic society this would mean that the party in power must have the support of the majority of the adult population.

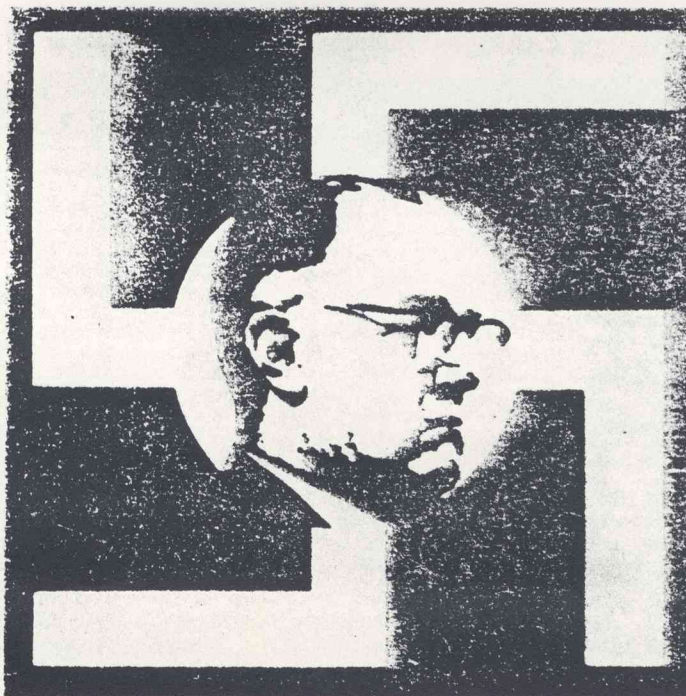
In 1960 the census showed South Africa to have a population of 15,841,000 people. In the same year a Referendum was held to decide whether South Africa was to become a Republic. Over 90% of the electorate participated in the Referendum. The results showed that 850,458 people had voted in favour of a Republic. South Africa became a Republic because 850,458 people out of 15,841,000 had decided that it should be so! Clearly there can be no connection between democracy and South Africa.

We have introduced our discussion with a somewhat inelegant collection of figures. We want to get to grips with our problem. We want to analyse the nature and the extent of the support that the Nationalist Party enjoys in South Africa. From the figures that we have quoted it becomes clear that the right to decide who shall govern the country and how they shall govern, belongs exclusively to the 3,068,000 whites (1960 figures) in the country. But the figures also tell us that only 52.3% of the votes had gone to the Nationalists. 775,878 people had actually voted against a Republic. The task of this article is to take a closer look at that section of the white population in South Africa that keeps Vorster in power.

THE NATIONALIST PARTY

There are approximately 1,750,000 Afrikaners in South Africa. The Nationalist Party is the party of this section of the population. The Party was formed in 1914 under the leadership of General Hertzog as the party of those Afrikaners who refused to accept the idea of a party serving both the English and Afrikaans-speaking sections of the (white) population.

It is not difficult to understand why the Afrikaners could not accept the idea of reconciliation with the English. From the time, in 1795, when the British had first set foot in South Africa, there had been strife between Boer and Briton. The inevitable climax had come in the form of the Anglo-Boer war. For the Boers the war was the climax to "a century of wrong". "There rose up before them . . . the memory of the past, . . . of the thousand and one defeats and humiliations to which



they had been subjected ever since the British presence established itself in South Africa." (Brian Bunting: THE RISE OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN REICH pp. 15-16). The war itself only served to intensify the hatred of the Boer for the British. They were chased from their homes and their farms were burnt to the ground. Some 26,000 Boer women and children perished in British concentration camps. Ramsay MacDonald wrote prophetically that "when every other memory of the war will have faded away, the nightmare shadows of the camps will still remain". (Bunting p. 17)

The growth of the Nationalist Party from its birth in 1914 until the present is admirably dealt with by Brian Bunting in the book from which we have already quoted. It was inevitable that an organism born of hatred and fear should grow into a deformed and repulsive monster. We shall not try to tell that unsavoury tale once more. We need only note that, coupled with its opposition to the British, the Nationalists came to power on the basis of the most rabid and vicious racialism. This, more than anti-British sentiment is what brought them to power. This racialism, as we shall attempt to show, is what is keeping them in power. The same racialism also contains the seeds of their inevitable defeat.

We have said that the Nationalists derive their main support from the Afrikaans-speaking section of the whites in South Africa. But even within the ranks of this small section of the population there are contradictions. The Afrikaners do not form one undifferentiated whole. Within their

ranks there are classes and, consequently, class differences. At the moment these differences are hidden behind the common benefit that the white section as a whole derives from the exploitation of the non-white people of South Africa.

But society is not a dead, unmoving thing. Contradictions that may at one time be suppressed may at another time assert themselves with shattering force!

THE WHITE WORKER

The government enjoys the support of most of the white workers in South Africa, especially that of the Afrikaner worker. In 1911, 80% of Afrikanerdom was still living on the platteland. The development of a modern economy, however, cut into the fabric of their simple way of life. Capitalism was penetrating into the innermost pore of South African society. Everything that stood in the way of the young but vigorous capitalism had to perish. The Boer with his subsistence farming was in the way. By 1925, the number of ruined and dispossessed "poor whites" stood in the region of 300,000.

The Nationalist Party was formed in the period when the ruined Boer was starting his reluctant trek into the towns. The towns were a hostile world for the Boer. On arriving there the Boer found that he did not have the necessary skills to compete with the immigrant white worker. He was left to find his way in the competition with the "Black worker".

To add to his humiliation he also found that his language was despised. It is easy to see why he saw salvation in the party of Hertzog.

The Nationalist Party and the other organisations of the "volk" made it their duty to rescue the helpless Afrikaner worker. Relief bodies were formed. There was a fierce struggle to have the language of the Afrikaner accepted. The Afrikaner organisations provided a cultural retreat for the homeless worker.

Over the years, therefore, the white worker has come to look to the Nationalist Party to protect him against the realities of life. This was the basis of his support for the Nationalist Party and it remains so now.

The white worker supports the government because the government keeps him in a position of privilege. Job reservation protects him from the competition of other workers. It is government policy to see to it that the white worker receives "white man's wages". In a word, government policy makes it very difficult for a white man to be poor!

Of course, it would be complete oversimplification to say that the white worker supports the government only because that government sees to it that he gets a good job. The white worker undoubtedly supports the ideology of the Nationalist Party. He supports the racism of that Party.

Here someone may point out that even



the outlook, the ideology of the white worker is based on his privileged position. The white worker can see that his privileged position depends on a policy of racial discrimination. As long as racism can secure his position of privilege, he will support racism.

From this it may be concluded that the white worker may be persuaded to discard his racist outlook if he can be shown that racism cannot any longer keep him in a position of privilege. In other words, if we accept that the outlook of an individual depends on his real situation in life, then we must also accept that his outlook will change when his situation changes.

This, in fact, is a profound truth. But like any other truth, if it is carried to extremes it will merely become ridiculous. If we just accept this as a formula, then we shall conclude that we have merely to bring about a change in the position of the worker and then we shall hold our breath (or our thumb if we are so inclined) and wait for the magic change to take place. We shall be sorely disappointed. All that will happen is that we shall become uncomfortable from holding our breath.

The ideology of people is indeed based on their material conditions in life. By this we mean a certain set of ideas. For instance, a person who is oppressed by others will grow to hate those who oppress him. But the important thing is that he will not stop hating those who have wronged him the moment they stop oppressing him. That hatred will be ingrained in him. He may even pass it on to his children. In other words, even though his former oppressors have long since ceased to oppress him, even though he may not be living in the same place anymore, that person may continue to hate them. And his children, who might never even have seen the people, will also hate them.

The example has its defects but what we wished to explain is that although a certain outlook grows out of the situation in which the person finds himself, that outlook may remain with the person long after the original cause has disappeared. In fact, the outlook may even be adopted by others who do not even know the original cause. These persons merely accept the outlook of those around them. Very few people ever stop to think why they have a particular outlook. A common example is the attitude of many people to communism. Many people who hate communism have never bothered to find out what communism is. But they hate communism nevertheless.

The same thing applies to the white worker and his racism. Very few white workers, we are sure, have ever stopped to consider why they are racists. It is just ingrained in them that they should hate black people. But they hate them all the same! In other words, from having an original cause, the outlook or ideology of the person eventually becomes something that can survive even after the cause has disappeared. It leads a separate existence, independently of the original cause. But in spite of this, the material conditions under which the man lives do finally determine his outlook. Therefore, if he should retain the same outlook even after the cause has disappeared, **it now becomes possible** to change his outlook. All we must bear in mind is that his outlook will not change automatically. Nor will it change immediately.

What are the practical conclusions to be drawn from this? First we must see to it that the material situation of the person is changed. But this will only be the beginning. Having achieved this, we must, by propaganda and otherwise, hasten and help the change in the outlook of the person.

THE MATERIAL CONDITION OF THE WHITE WORKER

The conditions of life of the white worker are most eloquently told by the fact that from 1935 to 1960 the wages of white miners (mine workers) rose from R1,617 per year to R2,296 per year. In the same period the cash wages of non-white mineworkers actually declined (!) from R144 to R140. Throughout the South African economy the story is the same. Always we shall find that wide gap between the income of the white worker and that of the black worker. The average income (per person) in South Africa in 1960 was R226. This figure places South Africa between the very rich and the very poor countries of the world. But this figure is very deceptive to the person who does not know South Africa. Actually, when we take a closer look, this average income is split up in the following way:

Whites:	R631
Asians:	R133
Coloureds:	R86
Africans:	R63.

(Houghton: THE SOUTH AFRICAN ECONOMY p. 159)

There is no need to elaborate on these figures. In any case, the immensely

privileged position of the white worker in South Africa has been the subject of a considerable body of literature already. This privileged position of the white worker has a history as long as the industrialisation of South Africa itself. But in 1948, with the coming to power of the Nationalists Party, their position became firmly entrenched.

Job reservation was made law by the Industrial Conciliation Act of 1956. Under section 77 (as amended by Act 11 of 1959) the Minister of Labour may reserve certain jobs for the members of a certain race. The purpose of the Act was specifically to protect the white worker from the competition of other workers. It has resulted in a labour structure which has been called "multi-racial teams of non-competing workers". Furthermore, to make assurances doubly sure, the Act also provided for the racial exclusiveness of Trade Unions. Moreover, the Native Labour (Settlement of Disputes) Act of 1953 had already made it illegal for African workers to go on strike.

The white worker was cosily surrounded by a wall of protective legislation. But the very fact that it was found necessary to pass a law such as the 1956 Act, shows clearly how insecure and vulnerable is the position of the white worker.

South Africa is a capitalist country. For the capitalist, the main concern is to get as large a profit as possible. In other words, the capitalist is interested in exploiting the worker as much as possible. In practice this means that the capitalist pays the worker as small a wage as possible.

There are certain limits below which the capitalist cannot depress the wages of the workers. The worker must, for instance, receive sufficient to keep himself and his dependants alive. Then also, the worker must be paid enough to maintain a certain standard of living. But neither of these conditions are binding and absolute. If conditions make it at all profitable for him, the capitalist will do his utmost to depress the wages of the workers as low as possible, even below the level of bare physical survival. In the case where there is a large and constant supply of labour, for instance, the capitalist shows small concern for the health of the worker because he knows that the worker can be replaced. This is the case in a highly developed and wealthy country like America where about 4,000,000 people are unemployed. But the worker is especially vulnerable in a country like South Africa where it is illegal for him to defend himself by strike action. The

worker is especially vulnerable where his Trade Unions are not recognised and where he has no voice in the political bodies of the country. Speaking about the conditions of the African people in South Africa, Comrade Tambo (OLIVER TAMBO, President ANC-Ed.) said that "in the urban areas 4 out of every 5 families are starving. The rate is higher in country areas . . . The average life expectancy of an African is 37-42 years. For the whites it is 67-72 years . . ." (Address to the International Conference on Economic Sanctions against South Africa, London, 1964).

But if it is the aim of the capitalist to pay the worker such a low wage, how do we then understand the high wages

that are paid to the white workers? Surely the capitalist cannot approve of this great expenditure on white wages if he could get the same job done at a lower wage. True, there are laws which prevent the capitalist from displacing white labour by black labour. But would it not be natural then to expect the capitalist to oppose these laws so as to bring about a more profitable state of affairs for himself?

In the beginning of industrialisation in South Africa there was a real economic motive in paying white workers a very high wage. These white workers were immigrants who had to be attracted to South Africa to come to fill the need for skilled labour in the country. Neither the white nor the black wor-

kers in South Africa had these skills. But by 1922 the situation was beginning to change. By that time about four-fifths of white mineworkers were Afrikaners. The black workers had also developed considerable skill already. So much so that the Chamber of Mines decided to increase the number of black workers at the expense of the white workers. The aim of this move was to reduce costs. In the "Rand Rebellion" that followed, the white workers stood up in defence of their position. Smuts called out the armed might of the State. During the strike the capitalists showed that their profits were more important than the welfare of any worker, be he black or white. Many white workers were killed. Three white workers were hanged.

Today, as much as in 1922, the white worker is a luxury that the capitalist economy cannot afford indefinitely. We should point out here that we are not speaking about economies in general but of the **capitalist** economy. In other words, we are not opposed to workers, white or black, getting a high wage. Neither are we saying that it is not economical to give a worker a high wage. What we are saying is that it is against the nature of the capitalist economy to give any worker a high wage.

From the point of view of the capitalist the white worker is a luxury which

he could well do without. But for the government it is important that the white worker should continue to get a high wage so that the government can be assured of the vote of the white worker. It has been estimated that "civil servants and employees of state capital number about one fifth of the white population, constituting with their families a majority of the electorate". (Bunting: *RISE OF THE S.A. REICH* P. 287). As G. Fasulo commented in "Fighting Talk" in 1952: "All the Nats have to do is to keep the dependants of the state happy and they can remain in power indefinitely . . ." And the government has made no secret of its dependence on the support of the white worker. Balthazar Vorster declared in the House of Assembly in 1956 that "We know one person only to whom we owe an explanation, and that is the white worker in South Africa, who has brought the Nationalist Party to the position it occupies today and who will keep it in that position in the future". (Quoted in *THE RISE OF THE S.A. REICH* p. 252)

This situation represents a contradiction between the capitalists and the government, between economics and politics. But the business world cannot carry its opposition (to government policy) to the point of open defiance without undermining its own interests. On the other hand, many capitalists fear that government policy may in the long run lead to total ruin. The more this fear approaches reality the more the capitalist may be expected to agitate for reform.

So far rumblings have been heard from the mining and from the manufacturing industry. We shall confine ourselves to the manufacturing industry. This is not so because of lack of evidence of the desire for change in mining. We are taking manufacturing industry because, as Professor Houghton says in his study of the *SOUTH AFRICAN ECONOMY*, "The importance of manufacturing in the future economic development of South Africa cannot be too greatly stressed because all the indications are that it must be the cornerstone of future expansion." Manufacturing industry provided employment for 782,000 workers in 1969. "Several government reports have stressed the importance of building up a powerful and diversified manufacturing industry." (*THE S.A. ECONOMY* p. 126).

The steps proposed by the Third Interim Report of the Industrial and Agricultural Requirements Commission proposes, amongst other things that:

1. Better use be made of labour, including the **increased use of Africans in industry** (my emphasis - P. P.)
2. There should be more equitable distribution of material income.

S. H. Frankel in 1944 and Harry Oppenheimer in 1950 both pointed out that manufacturing industry was heavily dependent on mining. Oppenheimer pointed out that manufacturing industry would have to increase its exports to become an independent and strong sector of the economy. "This is really another way of saying," said

Oppenheimer "that as a whole, industry in South Africa . . . must reduce costs."

The Viljoen Commission of 1958 proposed amongst other things that:

1. The purchasing power of the population be increased.
2. Employment opportunities be provided for the whole population.

With prophetic insistence we see the demand for the removal of Job Reservation. This, in fact, is what is meant by providing employment opportunities for all and by making more use of Africans in industry. The result will be that the white worker will be thrown into the general labour pool. The effects of competition will be felt. The capitalist will be free to employ an African at a lower wage for a job that

was formerly done by a white worker. The demand that the purchasing power of the population should be increased means nothing else but that non-whites should receive higher wages. But at the same time there is a need to reduce costs and an increase in the wages of the non-whites will have the effect of **raising costs**.

Therefore, at the same time as the wages of non-white workers are raised costs of production will have to be reduced.

One way of reducing costs will be to make more intelligent use of the labour force. The worker must be allowed to develop certain skills. This means that migratory labour workers who have acquired certain skills must leave and other unskilled and untrained workers come to take their place. This is obviously a wasteful practice. The worker must be allowed to settle near his place of employment. He must have better living conditions.

Costs will also be reduced by replacing white workers by non-whites. (We must stress again that this is not the policy of the African National Congress, nor of any progressive organisation. We are here trying to see how the capitalist will reason. Our own aim is not to reduce the white worker to the starvation level at which the African worker must at present survive. Our main aim is to raise the African worker to the level that the white worker enjoys at the present moment.)

The needs of the developing economy demand the measures that we have enumerated above. And these changes threaten the privileged position of the white worker. If these changes are implemented, the white worker, in com-

mon with the other workers in South Africa, will suffer the fate of the worker in a capitalist society.

We must not conclude from this that we must merely sit back and wait for the change to take place. What we have shown here is that **tendencies toward change exists**. We have shown that these tendencies are backed by powerful industrial and financial forces in South Africa. We have shown that contradictions exist between the economic laws that operate in South Africa and the policy of the government. The government will try (is trying) to suppress these contradictions. It may even be successful for a time. But the government **cannot remove** these contradictions. The contradictions will only grow sharper.

We are not going to assume the mantle of the prophet and try to predict exactly what path the white worker will follow.

At best we can indicate the possible paths and indicate how we might influence the development in the thinking of the white worker.

As the attacks on his standard of living, on his social position and on his material position as a whole become more real and effective, the white worker will be forced to adopt a certain course of action to save himself from

complete ruin. In our opinion there are two possible courses of action open to him. The first is a drift into a more reactionary position. The privileged position of the white worker is completely bound up with the future of the Nationalist Party. The attacks on his position will, therefore, come in the form of attacks on the Nationalist Party. The attacks on the Nationalist Party are not deliberately directed against the white worker as such. To the white worker, however, it will seem as if he is the object of the attack. The government is fully aware of this. It encourages the white worker in his fear of "swart gevaar" ("Black Danger"). And as the crisis becomes more intense, the propaganda of the Nationalists will correspondingly increase. The 'laager' will be drawn tighter.

The success of the Nationalist Party propaganda will depend on the extent to which the white worker can be convinced that the regime is invincible. Nationalist Party propaganda will be successful if the white worker can be convinced that the government will be able to overcome the crisis. If the white worker can be convinced that the government is invincible, the white worker will be prepared to make sacrifices. In any case, the white worker will reason, the sacrifices will be only temporary.

The Nationalist Party starts off at an advantage. Their propaganda will not be falling on virgin ears. The Afrikaner is steeped in racist ideology. He is steeped in the idea of the "God-given" task of the Afrikaner to rule the country. The Church, the school and every other influence to which he has been subjected has convinced the Afrikaner of his Holy Mission in South Africa. The white worker, especially the Afrikaner, will therefore, support the Nationalist Party. He will support it not only because the Nationalist Party promises to rescue him from the crisis but also because he is filled with hatred for the black man. He will be a good target for Nationalist propaganda. The Nationalists will try to convince him that it is the black man who has caused him to land in such a critical situation. There will be the old scare-story of the "swart gevaar". If this propaganda succeeds the attention of the white worker will be turned from the real cause of his misery. His anger will be turned against the black man. This will be a masterstroke for the government. We must remember that it is the policy of the Nationalist Party that has brought about the crisis in South Africa. The Nationalist Party is, therefore, responsible for the

critical situation in which the white worker will find himself. If the white worker could understand this he would direct his anger against the government. But the Nationalist Party, with its propaganda of the "swart gevaar" and the Christian mission of the Afrikaner, is turning the attention of the white worker away from the real cause of his troubles. But not only this. At the same time the Nationalists are succeeding in turning the anger of the white worker against the progressive forces.

EXCLUSIVELY REMOTE

History has many examples where the ruling classes used this trick. Hitler perfected the art when he turned the anger and frustration of the German people against the Jews. The whole of German history during the reign of the Führer is very instructive from the real cause of their discontent and used for the most reactionary purposes.

We see, therefore, that although the worsening in the condition of the white worker will lay the basis for a change in his outlook it can also be used to make him an even more fanatic supporter of the Nationalist regime. This should serve as a warning to those who see life as a simple process of cause and effect.

The revolutionary in this situation has a twofold task. He must prevent the white worker from throwing in his lot with the Vorster regime. He must also try to convince as many white workers as possible that they should side with the revolution.

These are very difficult tasks. In fact they are so difficult that most South Africans would not even bother to try. In the first place, the Afrikaner worker is going to prove a very unwilling listener to our propaganda. And even then, as we have already explained, a man's outlook does not change overnight.

The white worker is so exclusively remote that it is very difficult to reach him. Even apart from mere revolutionary propaganda, the majority of the white workers do not even read the English press. In other words, the white worker is constantly at the mercy of Nationalist propaganda that reaches him through the pages of the Afrikaans press. Trade Unions are racially divided, there are Group Areas. Above all there is the thick layer of racialism that only thickens over the years.

Furthermore, the apparent nature of the revolution antagonises the white worker. The revolution is of course, democratic and aimed at a non-racial society. But by the nature of South African society it takes the form of a struggle between black and white. The white worker cannot be expected to be bubbling over with enthusiasm to listen to people who appear to him to be intent on destroying him. Moreover, revolution does not take place in a laboratory with someone to watch over it in case something goes wrong. Revolution is made by people, people with feelings, with hatred and bitterness and a long memory.

NOTORIOUSLY REACTIONARY

There are similarities between the white workers and the workers in an imperialist country. The workers in such a country too get some small portion of the benefits of the exploitation of the colonial country. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that working class leaders in such countries are notoriously reactionary as far as their attitude to the colony is concerned. But it is, nevertheless, the duty of the progressive workers in their ranks to explain to them that they should associate themselves with the struggle of the colonially exploited people. They must be shown that the colonial people and themselves have the same enemy. Working class solidarity must be forged, across the waves as it were, between the workers of the exploiting and those of the exploited country.

But although there are similarities, we must bear in mind that there are factors which make the task of the South African revolutionary infinitely more difficult. Outstanding amongst these difficulties are racialism and the fear of the black man that has so conscientiously been instilled into the minds of the white workers.

On the whole the prospect looks grim. But we must not despair entirely. Propaganda must be consistently directed at the white workers. The nature of the revolution must be explained to them. It must be made clear that ours is not a racial struggle. It must be made clear that there is a place for all in a democratic society such as that for which we are struggling. Above all, their real situation and their real future must be explained to them. It must

be made clear that the privileged and artificial position that they enjoy at the moment will not last for ever.

But our main weapon is our strength. We will not beg the white worker. We will not plead with the white worker. We will not make any concessions to the white worker. We shall be speaking from a position of strength. We must make it clear that we will win: We must make it clear that the government will crumble before our mighty onslaught. There must be no doubt in the mind of the white worker about the outcome of the revolution. He must realise that we hold all the cards. The future is ours. He has a place in that future.

Coldly, scientifically and confidently we must show him that the regime will crumble. We must explain to him the trends that are at work in South Africa. He must be quite clear in his mind that the present state of affairs will not last. It cannot last. He must be made aware

of the fact that Vorster and his band of lying madmen can promise him nothing but ruin and doom.

There is hope for the white worker. Much will depend on us. **But in the final analysis, the choice will be theirs.** We can do what is required of us. We can do no more. The freedom of our country is at stake.