



Socialists and the SACP

Dangerous liaisons?

The SACP is making strong gains among socialists. But how democratic has the Party become? Mike Morris gives his verdict.

SOUTH AFRICA is a land filled with political dilemmas. Internal and external events have turned our political scene upside down. They include De Klerk's seizing of the political initiative through the unbanning of organisations and his promise to repeal the remaining apartheid laws, as well as the collapse of Eastern Europe.

We are witnessing strange events, and one of them is the rapid movement into the South African Communist Party (SACP) of a large grouping of leftists who traditionally were its strongest left wing critics.

Many of these leftists had been concentrated in the union movement. The independent unions had become the organisational base and rallying ground of a strong grouping of organisationally astute and politically articulate democratic socialists. Their intellectual roots lay in the new Western Marxism of the 1970s rather than in the Stalinist traditions of Russian Bolshevism. Their political focus on a particular style of organising (i.e. union autonomy, democratic organisation, mass accountability) was often bitterly opposed by those, including many in the unions, who sided with the SACP.

Denounced

Over the past ten years there was little love lost between them and the SACP. They were regularly denounced in the pages of party journals (mainly the *African Communist*) and in publications of the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU). In many ways the ideological struggle between "workerism" and "populism" was a conflict about the right to hold a leftist position independent of that of the SACP. To be labelled "workerist", especially within the SACP and SACTU, was to be cast

among the fallen and regarded as anti-soviet, anti-nationalist and a danger to the entire liberation movement.

The history of the SACP's dominance within the liberation movement echoes with exclusions, rumour-mongering and open expulsions of those who stood accused of drifting ideologically outside the political lines laid down by the SACP. Sometimes it was subtle and buried, often it was crude and slanderous. But the goal was always the same: to set the boundaries for discussion and debate. The result was the creation of a political and intellectual culture that embodied many of the characteristics of Stalinism -- political thugery, dogmatism, slander, slavishness.

Choices

So why have so many democratic socialists chosen to join the SACP? Three developments are key to understanding this process:

- Most importantly, February 2nd last year opened up the political space in South Africa in extraordinary ways. It also forced political choices on everyone, choices which had been unthinkable one month earlier. This was especially the case for the left. There was a shift towards open political competition and organisation, towards building mass membership and demonstrating one's political strength in ways which had been made impossible by state repression. It was no longer enough to have membership of COSATU or to have active sympathy with a particular organisation or tendency. The left had to find a political home. The party was over; it was time to find a party!

On the surface the question was "Which political organisation do you belong to?" But buried in it was another



ALLIANCE ON THE MARCH: How far should

question: how could the left effectively organise a political membership, unify socialist forces and express an alternative ideological perspective?

- Almost at the same time, the collapse of Eastern Europe forced upon some sections of the SACP the realisation that the old regime of socialism was gone. The reference points of orthodox, "approved" socialism disappeared. The examples of Eastern Europe which could be distorted to show a fantasy world of "real existing socialism" had crumbled. As a result, "ideological correctness" could not be enforced in the same old ways.

Within the SACP some people - almost certainly a minority - welcomed the opportunity to express a new direction. But it remains doubtful whether those who now so fashionably express their dislike for "dictatorial socialism" felt this way eighteen months ago. (How else would one explain the adoption of the SACP's "Path to Power" programme in 1989, which uncritically held up some Eastern European countries as socialist success stories and guides for the historical advance of the party?)

Still, the publication in early 1990 of Joe Slovo's critique of Stalinism ("Has Socialism Failed?") did signal the start of an attempt to show that the SACP was embarking on a *glasnost* of its own. And so the question arose for the democratic left in the unions: could the SACP be the party to lead them "forward to a democratic socialism", as the main ban-



it go?

ner of the SACP's first open rally in Johannesburg declared?

- As a result of its strong support for the ANC, the SACP had emerged from decades of underground struggle and exile with enormous credibility. As well, COSATU's campaigning for socialism had shaped the consciousness of important sections of workers and township youth. With its commitment to the national liberation struggle - but with a socialist focus - the worker leadership of the unions looked for a political organisation that would accommodate them. Many found this in the SACP.

Opportunities

February 2nd brought tough political choices and tempting opportunities. The SACP was forced to emerge from its tight, secretive mould and needed a mass membership which could no longer be controlled by a small clique. The collapse of Eastern Europe strengthened the position of democratic tendencies within the party and forced it away from Stalinism. But the questions remained. Would this bring meaningful, structural changes to its ways of operating? Could the party be democratically controlled by its membership? At the same time the emergence of the SACP into the open meant that significant sections of the working class, youth and intelligentsia would join the party. Could the democratic left in the union movement risk watching its natural constituency migrate?

Basically, four options were available:

- Fight to turn the ANC into a socialist organisation
- Form a new socialist party
- Join one of the existing Trotskyist organisations
- Join the SACP with a clear perspective

The ANC option faced many problems but the major one was that very strong forces were pushing the ANC towards the centre-right. The ANC was suddenly a respectable, open political organisation battling to expand its base and unify as many sectors of the population as possible under its banner. As a result, those sectors and organisations that had little or no sympathy with socialist ideals were exercising increasing influence over the ANC.

The ANC had also to come to some accommodation with big capital if it was to persuade white society that it was a viable option for the future. Finally (and most importantly), it was clear to many on the left that it would be an historical tragedy if the ANC could not hold the middle ground and present itself as the party of national reconciliation.

So the best route was to maintain an alliance with the ANC in order to counterbalance other tendencies and tilt the balance towards socialist perspectives - redistribution, social justice, welfarism, political and economic democracy, trade union and other rights of civil society.

This left the option of forming a new, genuinely democratic socialist party free of the dictatorial currents of Marxism's own history. But the political set-up made that too difficult. February 2nd had not opened up the space for creating and labelling new parties; what it did allow was fundamentally shaking up old parties and organisations.

What about the other existing organisations on the left which had historically been in opposition to the SACP? Their support was insignificant; on the whole they were regionally concentrated in the Western Cape; organisationally they were wracked with factionalism and subject to the same vanguardist authoritarianism which they loudly denounced as Stalinist in others. And no-one, unless they were already persuaded, was going to swap organisational muscle for rhetoric.

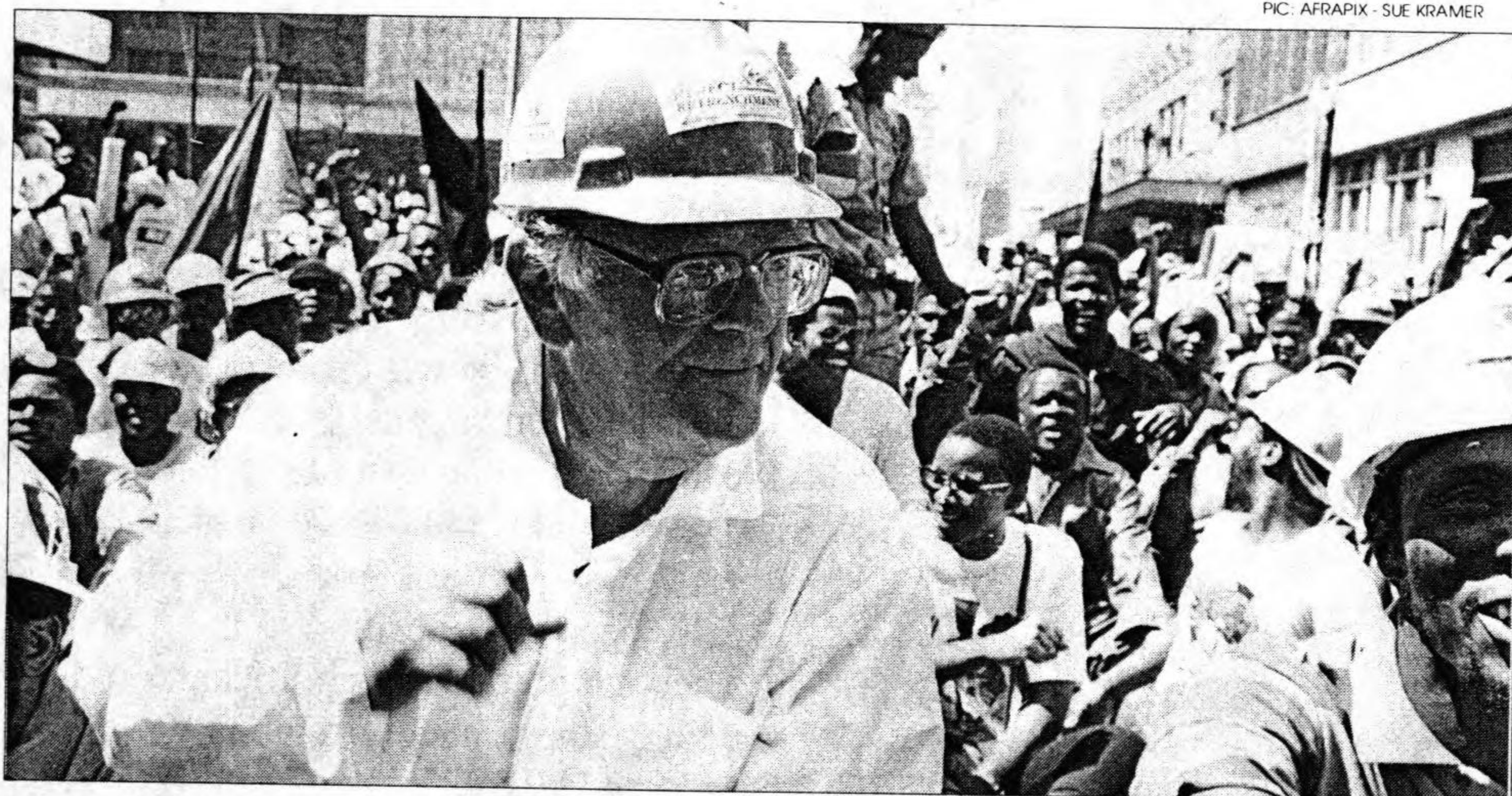
So that left the SACP option. But it, too, was surrounded by troubling questions. Could an organised left within the party ensure that it took its new slogan of democratic socialism seriously? How genuine was the attempt by some forces (grouped mainly around Slovo) to break with its Stalinist past? Could a substantial grouping of unionists and intellectuals with a democratic tradition, by joining the SACP, ensure a new socialist direction for the left in South Africa?

Debate

The debate raised crucial issues:

- The SACP would have to change from a secret vanguard party to one based on mass membership, with elected leaders who are publicly known and accountable;
- Probation periods and other means of manipulating membership status would have to be dropped;
- Decisions would have to be based on traditional union practices (elected representatives with mandates), and a new constitution would be required to establish proper branch structures and means of accountability;
- The party's Holy Grails like "Colonialism of a Special Type" and the 1989 programme "The Path to Power" would have to be re-evaluated.

There was, to my knowledge, no formal decision by an organised group to operate inside the SACP in an "entryist" fashion, as a hidden faction with a secret organisational loyalty. The above issues were not rock-solid pre-



WOONG FRIENDS: Questions about the Party's commitment to democratic practices

conditions to which all agreed before making their decision to join. Rather, such ideas were common in the loose and open debates that preceded such decisions.

What are the chances of them giving fresh life to a left agenda in South Africa? There are basically two central problems they will have to grapple with: the extent of the break with Stalinism and the nature of the alliance with the ANC.

The party membership is not uniformly eager to break with its Stalinist past. The exile old-guard is divided and there are far too many internal-cadres whose world views have hardly been affected by the collapse of "real existing socialism". Some of the "old-guard" seem ready to criticise Stalinism elsewhere in the world but resist the idea of applying that critique closer to home.

Harry Gwala's blatant defence of Stalin in the pages of *African Communist* shows just how rooted authoritarianism remains within the SACP. One could argue that a real debate in the pages of the *African Communist* indicates some openness, but it also reveals what kind of unbending, reactionary forces still occupy powerful positions in the SACP.

Dictatorial

There has been no attempt to reveal the roots of the SACP's glaring heavy-handedness and its intellectually deadening and dictatorial practices. The criticism against Stalinism emerging from the new enthusiasts of *glasnost* is aimed away from the SACP and directed either at Eastern Europe and the USSR or at errors of Marxist theory. We are constantly told that the party had already introduced *glasnost* before Gor-

batchev; that the break with Stalinism had occurred as far back as 1970; that the SACP at most suffered only from a "mild dose of Stalinism".

This is not good enough. It conveniently avoids the need to undertake a thoroughgoing analysis of past mistakes and deeply questionable practices. It ends up treating its new membership like ignorant fools who have no memory. This is not a moral question (although morality should not be ignored in politics) of assigning historical blame, of seeking a long-winded admission of guilt, or of demanding some form of historical retribution. Without sincere self-reflection those good comrades within the working class who enter the party will be left defenceless against authoritarian tendencies that remain strong within the SACP.

That unwillingness is also not just an intellectual problem. It radically influences the manner in which the party operates on the ground. For it is doubtful whether those who lead the SACP understand democratic functioning in the same ways as trade unionists. This is hardly surprising since (as they now often admit) the past 30 years of exile and underground activity has left them with little experience of democratic practice. Old habits die hard, and shouting "we are now democratic" from the rooftops should not be confused with bringing about a new style of operating.

This is very clear in the way the interim leadership has operated in Natal. Ordinary members have not been informed of decisions, let alone consulted. Fighting an old "cabal" without entrenching democracy merely installs a new "cabal". It entrenches authoritarianism in a new form, and, when it does so in

the name of democracy and pluralism, it may prove an even more insidious danger to the building of a new tradition of democratic socialism.

A second problem is the nature of the party's alliance with the ANC. Traditionally, this issue has been posed by right wing forces who point to what they regard as the unwarranted dominance of SACP members on the ANC's national executive. That concern has been made rather irrelevant by the ANC's rapid drift towards the centre-right. Still, the issue has another dimension, which the left has avoided: what effects does this alliance have on the internal operation of the SACP and on left wing policies and programmes in general?

Elsewhere in the world, almost all alliances between political organisations are based on relations of "externality". Each keeps its independence, separate membership, policies and programme. But they come together strategically to address shared concerns that are clearly laid out. This relation of externality (or autonomy) allows each partner in the alliance to build its own membership, win support for its own policies, and still advance shared interests within the alliance. In such a relationship internal democracy is strengthened rather than weakened.

"The SACP-ANC alliance is peculiar and unsuited to the new conditions"

The SACP-ANC alliance, however, is peculiar and totally unsuited to the new conditions in South Africa. Overlapping membership and executive structures encourage neither democracy or independence in the SACP, and it does not inspire SACP members to operate democratically inside the ANC.

For if the SACP is to operate as an independent, democratic organisation with its own (socialist) policies then its members will naturally push them inside the ANC. There will therefore always be a tendency to operate as an entryist bloc in the ANC with ultimate allegiance to the SACP. And this in turn will have a bad effect on internal democratic practices inside the SACP.

The alternative is to discourage the

• *this article continues on page 32*

Dangerous Liaisons?

Continued from page 18

will have a bad effect on democratic practices inside the SACP.

The alternative is to discourage the SACP's independence and water-down its left wing perspectives and policies.

This may mean that SACP members can really operate democratically as individuals inside the ANC, but the effect on the SACP is to emasculate it as an independent, democratic left wing organisation.

Maintaining the alliance in its present form means that either "cabalism" will be encouraged or socialist policies will be sidelined. As one unionist who has not joined the SACP put the problem: "Why should I put my energy into one organisation to build another? Why not just short-circuit this organisational mess and throw my energy into turning the ANC into a left-wing organisation?"

These two issues (democracy within the SACP and the nature of the alliance) both stem from SACP's inadequate break with its Stalinist past. The anti-Stalinist unionists who have joined the SACP face a critical dilemma. Can the key political principles of their style of unionism (democracy and political independence) survive in their new political home?

To avoid a critique of the SACP's past, to withhold criticism of its organisational structures, to abstain from comment on the nature of its alliances, to sacrifice comment on the absences in its programme (for fear of weakening the "Slovo faction") would seriously undermine those forces within the SACP which are striving to bring about a genuine democratisation.

Unless the SACP's authoritarian political culture is confronted, undone and replaced with a fresh, democratic and open political culture, the South African left will remain stuck in a time warp. We will continue to talk about democracy and pay lip service to a new socialism - while the hopes of ordinary people for a better and more just South Africa are sacrificed yet again.

It would be tragic if the SACP followed the repetitive cycle of communist parties elsewhere, a pattern well captured in Bertolt Brecht's bitter line: "The people have become disillusioned with the leaders, it is time to find a new people." □



SACP file



STILL WAITING: Richtersveld residents hope to reclaim their promised land

Another broken promise?

THE RICHTERSVELD debacle has taken another turn - for the worse. In February the Labour Party's Rev. Julies, a House of Representatives minister, refused at the last minute to sign an agreement that would have safeguarded the rights of Richtersveld communities who are threatened with removal from their ancestral lands.

The debacle centres on a planned national park in Richtersveld, a mountainous area of Namaqualand. At first, the House of Representatives' Department of Local Government, Agriculture and Housing wanted to remove residents from land they and their ancestors have farmed for over 1 500 years. Then a lengthy court battle led to a unique plan which respected both the environment and the rights of local communities. The compromise allowed Richtersveld farmers to stay on their land and participate in the running of the park.

The Rev. Julies' surprise refusal to seal the plan has now dumped Richtersveld residents back into the lap of uncertainty. So far Julies' only word on his controversial decision has been a firm "no comment".

Killer rain

IF YOU have always thought of rain as the bringer of life, think again. Across South Africa, some of those long-awaited rainshowers are becoming increasingly deadly.

The problem is something known as "acid rain", which occurs when large amounts of the chemical sulphur are released into the air. Most of this pollu-

tion comes from power stations and heavy industrial plants. Eskom admits that its power stations in the Eastern Transvaal produce 3000 tons of sulphur dioxide every day, enough to fill 400 olympic size swimming pools. Once in the air, the sulphur floats about in various forms -- until it is washed back to earth by rain. "Acid rain" kills agricultural crops, trees and river life; in North America, it has already destroyed huge forests and the fish life in thousands of lakes.

Just how bad is the problem in South Africa? According to two new studies, every year industries in the Eastern Transvaal pump out twice as much sulphur dioxide as their counterparts in the former East Germany, which is infamous for its heavily polluted air. If we are to avoid an "acid rain" disaster here, say environmentalists, industries must be forced to clean up their act. But many industrial bosses complain that stricter pollution controls are expensive and will eat into profits. Meanwhile, "acid rain" is eating away at the environment.

Dark side of light

YEAR AFTER YEAR, Eskom's coal-fired power stations pump millions of tons of pollution into South African skies.

Apologists argue that this is the unavoidable price we pay to have electricity in our homes. But many communities living near power stations do not have electricity.

Yet, they are hit hardest by this pollution, which causes lung cancer, emphysema and other chest illnesses. All in all, about two thirds of South African homes are without electricity. □