



Demonstration during the Soweto Uprising in 1976.

# South Africa

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## A brief history of the struggle

For centuries the people of Africa have struggled against the white settlers who came to colonize, oppress and dominate them. Through massive resistance and struggle, a number of African nations have fought for and won their independence from the colonizers who for centuries have raped and plundered the land, extracting super profits at the expense of the African people. Such countries as Angola, Mozambique, and Ethiopia through mass struggle have wrested their freedom away from the colonizers, notwithstanding the immense pressures through embargoes, outright invasions and attempted economic destabilization.

The people of South Africa are still today struggling against centuries of colonization. The African National Congress (ANC) which represents the aspirations of the overwhelming majority of the people of South Africa was founded on January 8, 1912 at a conference assembled at Bloemfontein, South Africa. Present at this truly historic conference were workers and peasants, professionals and intellectuals, tribesmen and chiefs, from all parts of South Africa. Only two years earlier the country was constituted into a union by the colonizers, consolidating white settler domination over the African masses. The assembly conferred, and at the end of their deliberations the ANC emerged.

Since its formation the ANC has been at the vanguard of countless struggles. Thousands

upon thousands have made great sacrifices, including their lives, for the cause of liberation.

South Africa was conquered by force and today is ruled by force. Be it the threat of force, or the actual employment of force, it is ever present in South African society.

European settlement in South Africa dates back to the year 1652, and because of the intrusive, predatory and aggressive policies of the white European settlers, disputes ensued, which soon led to war.

In the Cape Western Plateau, an area inhabited by the Xhosa-speaking section of African people, at least nine wars of resistance occurred in a span of almost 100 years against white encroachment.

First it was the Boers. Later the combined forces of the Boers and the British were checked in their attempted advances. However, superior arms helped them to push the indigenous people of South Africa slowly back beyond the Great Fish River; the settlers occupied parts of their ancestral land. Yet the people of South Africa were never defeated by the Boers.

In order for the Boers to continue their march into the interior of South Africa, they had to change their course and march northward, as they were forced to by the massive resistance of the South African people. Wherever the Boers went they were met with fierce opposition. They were fought and defeated in Natal, Bosutoland (now Lesotho) and in the eastern Transvaal, they were reduced to roving bands.

Had it not been for the arrival of British forces, the Boers would have eventually been defeated in their quest to occupy, dominate and enslave South Africa and its people. When the Boers first arrived in the Cape, every inch of the country was occupied. It was never a "no-man's" land.

Britain's total conquest of South Africa at the beginning of the 20th century marked a qualitative and quantitative change in the struggle against colonization and immensely strengthened the oppressors. The British

with their overwhelming superiority in arms and numbers of well-trained soldiers, were eventually able, after bitter battles, to subdue military opposition, and to colonize, dominate and exploit the country and people of South Africa.

### **BAMBATA REBELLION**

In the defeat of the Bambata Rebellion in 1906, which was an uprising against the imposition of a hut and dog tax, and against the furnishing of information for the census, over 4,000 people were ruthlessly murdered at the hands of the British. Bambata himself was decapitated in the typically inhuman fashion of the colonial oppressors.

This rebellion brought to a close the first 250-year phase of resistance by the South African people.

The formation of the ANC six years later had a direct connection with the Bambata Rebellion. Defeated militarily, totally disarmed and robbed of their land, denied any say in the government of their country, the people of South Africa had to find new ways of continuing their struggle against the white settlers.

They held mass meetings and demonstrations, held strikes and passively resisted. Testimonies and petitions to King Edward VII from many of the African organizations that came into being from the years 1905-1908, showed the magnitude of opposition and the sharp antagonisms to any continuation of a political system of white minority rule.

They saw the need for unity in the face of a common enemy. This was forcibly brought home when the government, under General Louis Botha, pushed forward to consolidate white hegemony within the system established by the South African Act of Union, which was passed by the British parliament in 1909, and ratified by the South African white parliament on May 31, 1910.

That date was the anniversary of the Treaty of Vereeniging, signed in 1902 at the conclusion of the Anglo-Boer

war which incorporated as its central key position a color bar clause, that precluded all Black people from being eligible to become members of parliament.

This period also saw the emergence of young African intellectuals who came from mission schools which had been established throughout the country. These young people helped what later developed into the African press, with articles written in both English and in African languages.

The British government, of course, flagrantly ignored the grievances and expressed wishes of the Black South African masses.

### **STRUGGLE AGAINST PASS LAWS**

The people of South Africa continued their struggle for freedom. Different acts of resistance were sought and found. In 1913, African women resisted the imposition of residential passes, forcing the government to rescind its measure. In 1915 over 2,800 miners struck, in a



**Militant women campaign against the pass laws in 1959.**

***"The time comes in the life of any nation when there remains only two choices: submit or fight. That time has now come for South Africa. We shall not submit and we have no choice but to hit back by all means within our power in defense of our people, our future, and our freedom.***

**—FROM THE MANIFESTO OF UMKHONTO WE SIZWE**

bid to have their grievances heard. And in 1917 the Industrial Workers of Africa was founded in Johannesburg. This was the first African industrial trade union.

The struggle against pass laws has been an ongoing struggle in South Africa and continues today. These laws require Black South Africans to carry a pass book that gives detailed descriptions of the holder, and whether they are permitted to be in the area they are in. Black South Africans can be stopped at any time and asked for their pass book, and jailed if they don't have it or a discrepancy is found.

In 1918, an anti-pass campaign led by the Bantu Women's League of South Africa, a branch of the ANC, ended in an heroic victory. In 1956 over 20,000 women marched on Pretoria, in a continuation of the militant struggle against the extension of pass laws to women.

In May 1918 over 150 striking sanitation workers were sentenced to two months hard labor for so-called breach of contract. The ANC launched a campaign for their release which then turned into a campaign for a general wage increase under the threat of a general strike. The strikers were released.

In 1919, 70,000 miners struck against their already bad and deteriorating working conditions. South African troops moved through the lines killing three and wounding over 40 strikers. Racist South African police along with armed white civilians attacked a meeting in solidarity with the striking miners, killing eight people and wounding over 80.

In 1943, the ANC Women's League was founded. In the same year the ANC Youth League was also formed. These two groups are special organizations within the ANC, to take up and organize issues that are of particular interest to women and youth. They are still active organizations within the ANC and are called the Women's Section and the Youth Section of the ANC.

On May 1, 1950, a general strike against all discriminatory laws and for full rights took place. South African police opened fire in the township of Alexandra as well as in other areas on the Reef, killing at least 18 people and wounding over 30. On June 26 of that same year the ANC called its first national political strike in response to these brutal killings. That day is now known as South Africa Freedom Day.

The birth of the Federation of South African Women came April 17, 1954. This organization encompassed all of the women of South Africa who were struggling against the hated apartheid system. South African women have been an integral part in the struggle for self-determination and freedom from the colonial regime. The formation of the Federation was a step forward, and

marked a new awareness of the tremendous contributions in all aspects of the struggle against apartheid that women have made.

### **BIRTH OF THE FREEDOM CHARTER**

In December 1953, at the annual conference of the ANC, a call was made for a congress of the people of South Africa. For many months they campaigned along with their allies and invited the people of South Africa to record their demands which would be incorporated in a document—the Freedom Charter. Millions of people participated in the campaign and sent in their demands.

On June 25-26, 1955, 3,000 delegates gathered at Clip-town, South Africa. They were workers and peasants, women, youth and students of all races and colors. They constituted the most representative gathering in the history of South Africa.

The campaign that was waged by the ANC, the South African Indian Congress, the Coloured Peoples Organization, SACTU, and the Congress of Democrats culminated in the writing of the Freedom Charter, which subsequently was adopted by all of these organizations as their official program for the liberation of South Africa.

The opening statement of the Freedom Charter declares: "That South Africa belongs to all who live in it, Black and white, and that no government can justly claim authority unless it is based on the will of all the people. . . ." Its ten-point program is the basis on which the people of South Africa can live together with full rights and equality.

Fifty years of peaceful demonstrations, marches and meetings for self-determination and an end to white minority rule were met with furious violence by the racist South African government. The colonization of South Africa in 1910 by imperialism placed one of the richest areas on the African continent in the hands of the white minority to the exclusion of the Black majority. The Sharpeville Massacre in 1961, where 69 people were bru-

### **FREEDOM CHARTER**

- The people shall govern!*
- All national groups shall have equal rights!*
- The people shall share in the country's wealth!*
- The land shall be shared among those who work it!*
- All shall be equal before the law!*
- All shall enjoy equal human rights!*
- There shall be work and security!*
- The doors of learning and culture shall be opened!*
- There shall be houses, security, and comfort!*
- There shall be peace and friendship!*

tally murdered and many more injured at the hands of that same white minority, was carried out with the full backing of both Britain and the U.S.

### HERO'S DAY

The continued oppression of the Black South African masses by the Pretoria regime made it clear that force had to be met by force. This led to the formation of Umkhonto we Sizwe (Spear of the Nation), the fighting arm of the ANC, on Dec. 16, 1961—Hero's Day. This was yet a new revolutionary stage in the struggle against colonization. On that day bombs shattered government installations; leaflets were distributed explaining the background of its formation.

In a speech made by Oliver Tambo, speaking of Hero's Day, he stated, "The first salvos of our demand shook the enemy. On that day we spoke to the white oppressor in a new way; we blew up the hated symbols of oppression with our homemade bombs. In 1967 we made our voice quite clear in the battlefields of Zimbabwe. There the white oppressor learned the lesson which we must teach him again and again—that a bullet kills a white man too. And out of the barrels of guns and homemade bombs let us go on showing Vorster and his gestapo that we are determined to smash apartheid and liberate our country. We are many and the white oppressors are few. Our cause is just and white domination is condemned everywhere. The hour of freedom has come."

Nelson Mandela, who led the underground struggle of Umkhonto we Sizwe, was captured in 1963 by the South African government. The Rivonia trial resulted in Mandela along with several others being sentenced to life in prison.

Massive strikes and uprisings reoccurred, including the Soweto uprising in 1976 where the apartheid regime murdered at least 1,000 children in Soweto alone and hundreds in other parts of the country during months of nationwide resistance.

Even with the full support of the greatest imperialist

power ever, with one of the most advanced military arsenals in the world, along with nuclear weaponry, the apartheid regime has been unable to subdue the Black South African masses.

The South African liberation struggle has begun to draw not only sympathy but support from all segments of the civil rights, progressive and trade union movements in this country. In the earlier period much of the struggle seemed to be focused on international organizations, such as the United Nations, and much less attention was paid to the U.S. government as the collaborator and supporter of the apartheid regime. If this momentum is maintained, it can only be of immeasurable significance in helping to topple the racist South African regime. Pretoria's latest attempt to legitimize apartheid by cramming their so-called new constitution (that gave limited representation to people of mixed race and those of Indian descent but offered no representation to the Black majority) down the throats of the South African people has resulted in one of the most massive and sustained uprisings since Soweto.

Under the leadership of the ANC, the United Democratic Front (a coalition of many organizations throughout South Africa that was formed to oppose the new constitution), and Black trade unions, there has been a general strike of over one million Black workers, continued school boycotts, open acts of sabotage, and countless demonstrations and rallies throughout South Africa which have rocked the very foundations of the apartheid system.

Not Washington, London, nor Pretoria with all their military might are capable of shoring up the crumbling apartheid system against the tide of resistance.

To quote from the manifesto of Umkhonto we Sizwe: "The time comes in the life of any nation when there remains only two choices: submit or fight. That time has now come for South Africa. We shall not submit and we have no choice but to hit back by all means within our power in defense of our people, our future, and our freedom."

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