

# **J. B. MARKS, COMMUNIST, MAN OF THE PEOPLE, FIGHTER FOR FREEDOM**

**Extracts from a speech by JOE SLOVO recorded at a SACTU seminar on the life and times of J. B. Marks held at Morogoro in March 1983 to commemorate the 80th anniversary of Marks' birth on March 21, 1903.**

J.B. Marks was truly a towering man, and not only in physical appearance. If he commanded respect, it was not won through fear or bullying or arrogance, but through the very opposite qualities of human warmth, gentleness and charm. He was a true example of how a leader should be. We have had many leaders in our history, both past and present, whom we can admire, but JB belongs to that select group whom we can love as well. We have already heard from some of the veterans in exile of the terrible hardships in the Tanzanian bush at Kongwa, and they indicated to you that there was a time when all seemed lost. It was JB above all who gave them the will and the stamina to go on. Those who lived through that period know that when things became really bad it was JB who was the one who came to face the music. Another quality of his, which unfortunately is only too rare in leaders, is that he listened to and even believed he could learn from the rank and file. He never used that catchphrase of bourgeois armies — "You are a soldier, yours is not to reason why, yours is just to do and die." He understood perhaps more than anyone that without people's politics, there can be no people's army, and without a people's army there can be no people's war.

JB yearned for home, and never allowed the urgency of working to get back home to be blunted by the lure of exile safety and comfort. I personally cherish my last memory of JB at home. It was about 4 am on one of those gloriously crisp early winter days in Johannesburg and JB was looking sad and even more like Paul Robeson than ever. He was wearing an oversized army greatcoat, standing on a street corner in Newclare, where he was the area's best known figure, in fact often referred to as the Mayor of Newclare. Ruth and I had come to pick him up. JB and I were to be driven into our exile as a result of a decision that had been taken three days earlier by the Central Committee of the Party and by the working committee of the ANC. When we approached JB on that Newclare street corner, he greeted us and asked if we could hold on a minute as he wanted to go back home, a few blocks away, to collect a copy of Lenin's *State and Revolution*. I said to him: "But JB, there are plenty of those where we are heading". He said no, there was only one copy like the one he had; it had been inscribed by his teachers at the Lenin School where he had been taught his Marxism almost thirty years before.

When we reached Botswana and eventually arrived at Francistown, I saw another side of JB; his capacity to cope with racist barbarism, not just with anger but with ridiculing laughter, of which he was a master. Botswana had just achieved the first stage of its independence and a law had been passed lifting the colour bar in all hotels. We went to the Grand Hotel in Francistown where a white lady manager stood at the reception. There I was, younger than I am now and JB already quite a mature man in age standing next to me. I asked if we could please have a room. The manager took a key off one of the pigeon holes and said: "Number eight for you, and your 'boy' can go with the other travellers' 'boys'." JB just stood there, in his full six foot three, looked at her, and started laughing. Then taking me by the hand he said: "Let's go, Daddy". We went to see the district commissioner, Steenkamp, and kicked up a fuss. Perhaps for the first time in the history of Southern Africa a white and a black slept in the same room in a hotel, and JB enjoyed this victory immensely.

The organisation had chartered a Dakota to take 28 of our MK cadres (including JB and myself) from Francistown to Dar es Salaam. A short while before our departing a thin, energetic young man asked if it was possible to get a seat on our plane as he wanted to join the Frelimo forces. JB immediately took the decision that one of our cadres should be taken off the plane to make room for the Frelimo recruit. This recruit who travelled with us (and he remembers it very well and tells the story today) is

Comrade President Samora Machel. We were just about to fly off when another group rushed up and made another urgent request on behalf of someone who wanted to join Swapo. We took another of our cadres off and flew this man to Dar. His name was Peter Nanyembi, and he is at present the commander in chief of PLAN. (Since these words were spoken Comrade Nanyembi was tragically killed in Southern Angola).

### **Instruments of History**

I would like now to reflect on moments in our history when JB was one of the chief actors. It is only in Hollywood films that history is made just by individual stars. Nevertheless, political stars like JB often become history's instruments, and in turn they leave their own special and personal imprint on history. I want to mention a handful of instances when history chose JB as one of its chief instruments.

I begin with the tale of two strikes which are among the most important and definitive events in the first half of this century in South Africa; the 1922 white miners' strike and the 1946 black miners' strike. 1922 was objectively a strike to entrench white workers' privileges. Although it was drowned in blood, the 1924 Pact government institutionalised the division of the black and white working classes with white workers becoming the political appendage of the white ruling class. 1946 was the turn of the black miners under the leadership of JB. This was also a strike drowned in blood but it shook the system to its very foundations. It gave new meaning and direction to our revolution. After this event even the moderate blacks among the middle classes became less docile and withdrew from the dummy institution — the Native Representative Council. The strike also made a powerful impact on the emerging leaders of the Youth League such as Mandela, Tambo, Sisulu and Lembede. Together with communist veterans like Kotane and JB, they helped to transform the ANC from its early posture of cap-in-hand nationalism to an organisation which became the militant organ of revolutionary nationalism. The challenge by the black miners, the most exploited section of our black working class, had an equally dramatic impact on our ruling classes. The upsurge of black workers' strength and the potential which it demonstrated for the destruction of the whole capitalist-racist framework, was one of the key factors in the emerging pattern of extreme racist reaction reflected in the Nationalist victory in 1948.

The 1946 black miners' strike was an event which fundamentally transformed all the constituents of what we today call the Congress

Alliance. It created a receptivity from the up and coming militant Congress leaders towards working with Communists. After all, they had seen that it was the Party, in the person of individuals like JB, which was responsible for organising not only the mineworkers but most of the other black unions. It was the party that stood by the mineworkers and faced a sedition trial in the process. It was the mineworkers' strike that began to prepare the field in which the seeds were sown for the growth of the present alliance between the Party and the national movement.

JB devoted his life's energy to sharpening the three most important instruments of the black proletariat — the vanguard party, the mass national movement and the trade union organisation. JB was not just a leader of the Mineworkers' Union, but had worked hard to create progressive trade union co-ordinating centres. In 1945 he was elected President of the Transvaal Council of Non-European Trade Unions, and at the 1945 annual national conference of the Party he led a group of delegates in an unsuccessful attempt to get support for the idea that a separate black *national* trade union federation be created. It was perhaps clearer to JB than to most delegates at this conference that the white-dominated Trades and Labour Council would in the end frustrate rather than encourage the organisation of black workers. When JB argued in support of this idea, he said:

"The African is conscious of the need for working class solidarity but it seems impossible to achieve when the attitude of most white workers is as antagonistic as it is today".

I spent a lot of time with JB, particularly when we left the country, and I know that he was hopeful that the time would come when black and white workers would stand together. But to his credit, he understood earlier than most that this would not happen as a result of a moral somersault by white workers, that it could only come about as the result of the very power of the black organisations in the industrial field. JB understood this, and history has vindicated the group of delegates led by him at the 1945 conference of the Party.

### **Enemy of Reformism**

Another thing JB understood clearly was that there is nothing inherently revolutionary in strikes or in trade unions. He did not believe that from the mass organisation of workers there would spontaneously spring a revolutionary ideology. He had read and understood Lenin's fundamental work on this question *What is to be Done?* He knew how backward,

reformist, and social democratic was the political party that had been fathered by the best organised trade union movement in the world, the British trade union movement. I have no doubt that JB would have shaken his head in a gesture of real incomprehension at the current attempts, made mainly by university intellectuals, to use the trade union movement to create a workers' political party. We know this is in part an intent, which objectively they share with the racists, of destroying the SACP. In all their arguments for a need for a working class political movement, there is not a single mention of the Communist Party. For example in the speech which Forster read (and I use the word 'read' advisedly) at the Fosatu conference when he dealt with the need for a working class organisation, nowhere does he even acknowledge the existence of the organisation which inspired JB to become what he did in the workers' and trade union field.

Marxism-Leninism had taught JB that if the key to the struggle was the working class, then this class had to be led by the vanguard political party which alone could bring the science of revolutionary struggle to the working class. Only in this way could the working class be transformed from a class in itself to a class for itself. This is why JB was above all a communist and an activist at all levels of the SACP, both in its legal and illegal days. After 1950 when the Party was reconstructed underground, following its unjustified dissolution, JB was there. He already had some experience of underground work when he was organising the Mineworkers' Union, at a time when the government had used the war issue as a pretext for the notorious war measure 1245 which, for all practical purposes, made the organisation of mine workers illegal. It was made an offence for any person to assemble on mine property or to distribute any pamphlets on mine property, and it was in these hard conditions that the union was organised. And when the Party went underground we had a man who already had some experience in underground organisation.

In the underground period JB was elected to the Central Committee and later became Chairman of the Party at its sixth underground conference in 1962. Between 1952 and 1962 the Party organised an underground conference almost every two years. Representatives came from every major urban centre in South Africa and at each conference a new Central Committee was elected. JB was always anxious that we did not use excuses to suppress democracy, and he was amongst those who even under the most difficult security conditions insisted on the maximum democratic life within the Party. It was at the sixth conference over which JB presided that perhaps the most historic document in the history of the SACP was

debated and adopted — the Party programme, *The Road to South African Freedom*.

The programme represented an important moment in the growth of the Party and the maturing of its ideology. It is now over 20 years old and inevitably needs updating because of the enormous changes which have taken place in this period. Nevertheless its main thesis has undoubtedly stood the test of time. This is so particularly in relation to its characterisation of the social structure as akin to internal colonialism, or colonialism of a special type. You will not find this concept in the works of the founding fathers of Marxism. Our Party applied in South Africa the concept which Lenin had expressed when opening the very Party school that JB had attended. He told the students at what was then called the University of the Peoples of the East that Marxism was not a dogma to be repeated in parrot fashion and in accordance with some single model. He said explicitly: "The answer to some of your problems you will not find in any communist book..."

### **Our Contribution to Marxism**

In South Africa our objective conditions forced us to add some paragraphs to the communist book, to enrich the storehouse of real Marxism which is situated in the growth and development of revolutionary struggle and not in university libraries.

What is the concept of internal colonialism? Briefly, the programme emphasises that on one level South Africa is an independent, capitalist state with class divisions both within the black community and within the white community. There are white workers, a white middle class, black workers, a black middle class. On another level, the heights of economic power and political power are monopolised by a ruling class coming from the white group only, whereas all blacks, no matter what class they come from, suffer disability and social, political and economic disadvantage by virtue of the colour of their skin. In other words, blacks in South Africa have a status similar to a colonial people. But the ruling class, instead of being situated in some foreign metropolis, is situated inside the country itself. We know that after the Act of Union and the Statute of Westminster which gave sovereignty to an all-white regime the status of blacks did not change. The removal of direct imperial rule did not affect the status of blacks who remained a doubly-exploited people, living under a system of internal colonialism.

Why is it so important to be clear about the question of internal colonialism? This is not just an exercise in abstract theoretical conceptualisation; it leads us in a straight line to the essence of our revolutionary practice, to what our programme concretely regards as the main content of the present stage of our revolution — liberation from national oppression.

But some people on the “left” start shouting: What about the class struggle? It has always been the fate of leaders like JB to be shot at from both sides. He was accused by anti-communists of being interested in the class struggle only, and not in the national struggle. The Gang of Eight that was expelled some time after the Morogoro Conference said precisely this. Simultaneously he faced accusations from the ultra-left, repeated to this day, that he was interested only in national struggle, and that the Communist Party was just dragging along as the tail of the ANC.

The first milestone on the path to discovery of knowledge is the asking of the right question. If you start by asking whether we face a class struggle or a national struggle, you will find yourself swimming in a sea of thick intellectual syrup. The real question to ask is what is the relationship between these two ingredients which are so inextricably and dialectically bound up. We must also understand what we mean when we talk about class struggle. Do we understand this to be just the struggle of the workers against the bosses for higher wages and better working conditions? Any of you who have read, as JB did very well, *What is to be Done?*, will remember that Lenin said that the struggle between the workers and the bosses for higher wages and better working conditions is far from being the highest form of class struggle. The main task of the workers, he said, was to fight against Tsarist autocracy in alliance with any other groups or classes (including in the case of Russia the liberal bourgeoisie) who were prepared to fight, even if in a limited way, against the Tsarist autocracy. That was the main class task of the Russian proletariat, and there can be no doubt that the main content of the class struggle in South Africa today is the fight against racist autocracy.

The working class must maintain its position as the leading force in the fight against the racist autocracy, and in so doing it will be expressing at the highest possible level its class interests. When the police shoot black workers who are engaged in a strike, and they shoot down black children who are demonstrating against Bantu education, the one bullet is not marked “class struggle” and the other bullet not marked “national struggle.” The students and the workers face a common foe.

Connected with this is the problem of the stages of our revolution, which is also dealt with in the programme. This is another area in which the Party programme is often distorted. There is no Chinese Wall between the stages of our revolution. Even though we may say that the main content of this stage is the fight for a national democratic revolution, we are not saying that the problem of social emancipation is something that will be postponed until we have achieved some vague form of people's power. It is clear from the programme that what we stand for is continuing revolution. What will happen after the ANC is in Pretoria will depend on which class plays the dominant role *now* at *this* stage of the fight for liberation. It is at this stage that we need not just a mass national movement, but also an independent class party of the workers which plays a significant role in the liberation alliance. If we wait for the working class to organise itself only after the liberation flag is raised in Pretoria, we will be in the same unfortunate position as 90% of Africa found itself in after independence.

Even though at the moment we give emphasis to the national democratic revolution, it is also at this stage that we must continue to get across to the most advanced sections of the workers an understanding of the ideology of Marxism Leninism and an understanding that, in the long run, racism cannot be overthrown without the destruction of its foundation, which is capitalism. We cannot postpone the spreading of these ideas until we have achieved the so-called first stage of revolutionary advance. They must be spread now.

Recognising this (and despite the fact that he became a very prominent leader of the national movement) JB at all times jealously guarded the independent existence of the Party and its right to organise itself and to spread its ideology among the people. In doing this it was not acting in competition with the national movement, but in support of it on the questions where we shared common ground. At all times he insisted that we go beyond the immediate issues and open the eyes of the people, including members of the ANC, to the very nature of the system, its foundation and what the ultimate solution should be.

After the Rivonia disaster both the Party's and the ANC's internal machinery were smashed and no structures existed inside for a time. All that was left were groups of comrades and leaders who had been sent out of the country. In this situation it was JB together with another great beacon of our revolution, Yusuf Dadoo, who played the most important role in saving the Party and re-establishing its structures and they did this under the most difficult conditions.



JB's commitment to the national movement is well known. He became one of its most important leaders and he did so because there was no doubt that at this stage of our revolution you could not be a communist without at the same time supporting the platform of revolutionary nationalism. In 1950 he became president of the Transvaal ANC, in the teeth of opposition from certain people because he was a communist. In his capacity as president he was among the three persons who publicly called the May 1st strike: the salvo that was to trigger off a decade of mass struggle the like of which South Africa had not experienced before. Together with Walter Sisulu, he represented the ANC on the Planning Council which organised the Defiance Campaign of 1952. And here we see another quality of JB — that he was the kind of leader who always led from the front. He did not expect the rank and file to do what he was not prepared to do himself. Together with Kotane and a number of other leaders he was in the first batch to defy.

### **The Morogoro Conference**

In 1969 he presided over one of the most important conferences in the history of the ANC — the Morogoro Conference. It was an extremely critical moment. As chairman, JB was confronted by a democratically elected but at the same time very angry assembly of men and women who had lost confidence in many members of the National Executive Committee. We do not believe that history depends on one individual, but in the case of this particular conference it is true to say that it was Uncle JB who saved the day.

I want to say a few words about the Morogoro conference. People tend to think about it loosely and for every person Morogoro seems to have a different meaning. Most people who talk about the Morogoro Conference tend to concentrate mainly on the integration of non-African revolutionaries into the external mission of the ANC. It is true that this was one of the key demands of the rank and file of MK and it was very hotly debated. Quite a few of the then leaders of the NEC who have since shown their true colours were opposed to this move. I well recall the remarks of another comrade who needs to be remembered, Flag Boshielo, who became the army commissar. He was one of the finest MK cadres I have ever known, and one of the most dedicated communists. On this question at Morogoro of the incorporation of Indians, Coloureds and revolutionary whites into the national movement, I remember him standing up and saying:

"We have heard from so-and-so and so-and-so who say they are not racists, that they are not tribalist. They say they would love to be in the same organisation as Coloureds, Indians and democratic whites, but that very unfortunately the people are not ready for it yet".

Flag paused, and JB looked at him in a loving way, and Flag continued:

"Comrade Chair, it is not the people who are not ready, it is this one and this one and this one. They must stop using the people as an excuse for their own backwardness. They do not know the people. I know the people".

Flag was a man in the JB mould. We know what the decision was and we know that the enemies under the same colour eventually found themselves isolated and in the enemy's camp, some of them working for Matanzima.

But Morogoro was more than this question alone. In the first place Morogoro asserted the right of the rank and file to have a say as to who would lead them. JB understood and sympathised with this demand, as he also understood that often resistance under the guise of security to the democratic process was a device used by some to hold on to the reins of power. Morogoro also proclaimed that we must devote the bulk of our resources and efforts to work inside the country. At the time the ANC's underground structures were virtually non-existent and MK had not fired a single shot on South African soil.

Out of the Morogoro Conference there emerged the Revolutionary Council and the Strategy and Tactics document of the ANC, the only all-round programme the ANC has adopted. In its essence this document, like the Party programme, remains valid to this day; it is an outstanding example of the ideology of revolutionary nationalism. And lastly, comrades, immediately after the Morogoro Conference JB played a prominent part in the official meeting between representatives of the NEC of the ANC and representatives of the Central Committee of the Party to discuss our common contribution to the struggle and our closer collaboration from then on in a single attempt to overthrow the racist regime. Looking back on it comrades, it could be said that there were moments at that Morogoro Conference when the very future of our whole movement seemed to be in jeopardy. But it was JB's skill as chairman and the greatness of Comrade President Oliver Tambo (who was then acting president) which pulled us through and laid the basis for what we are today.

### **An internationalist**

JB made a major world impact in 1969 when he presided over one of the sessions of the very last meeting of the international communist movement

