

# 6 TOMORROW IT'S GOING TO BE YOU

Those classified 'coloured' by the South African government shared a community of interests only because they were defined as a separate community — not because of any innate characteristics uniting them. The descendants of indigenous Khoikhoi, San, and Bantu peoples, imported Asian and African slaves, and European settlers developed an identity that existed solely in contrast with the other race groups: less privileged than the whites, but better off than the Africans. Government 'coloured preference' policies<sup>1</sup> aimed at ensuring that the coloureds remained in this buffer, precluding any sense of either solidarity with other blacks or equality with whites. Non-racialism in the coloured community evolved out of a rejection of this arbitrary ethnic category based on the notion of 'miscegenation' of supposedly pure races.<sup>2</sup>

The most influential political trends among coloureds have traditionally emanated from the Western Cape, where the population is centred, outnumbering Africans as well as whites. The most active and militant regional structure of the ANC in the late 1920s was its Western Province branch. It organized Africans and coloureds from all classes on a non-racial basis at a time when the elite African leadership of the ANC was attracted to Marcus Garvey's Africa for the Africans' movement.<sup>3</sup> In the 1930s, the breakaway Independent ANC of the Southern Cape publicly attacked the 'Natives only' policy of the then conservative national ANC,<sup>4</sup> complaining that contact between African and coloured was confined to leadership level.

The coloured community was further politicized along non-racial lines by the government's creation of a Coloured Affairs Department (CAD) in 1943. Widespread opposition to the segregated administrative body gave rise to the Anti-CAD, and then the more radical Non-European Unity Movement.<sup>5</sup> While most coloured militants were ardent advocates of non-racialism in theory, in practice they mobilized around issues that affected their narrow community base.

“The history of the coloureds was totally different from the Africans and the Asians. They had the franchise, they only lost the franchise in 1956.<sup>6</sup> To, you must remember that the Cape was always seen as a kind of liberal place — it was certainly where a lot of the inter-marriages took place, with sailors who came into the port and so on — so you had an enormously mixed population, racially, culturally. You'd had a history of liberal city councils that were much slower to enforce apartheid than elsewhere, like in the Transvaal or the Free State.

## ***Do you think the coloured community has suffered from the insecurity of a minority?***

I think that's important, but there is something more important: there was always the promise of the white dominant group that the coloureds would be treated as an appendage: 'They are our step-children, you know, our half-children, our bastard children.' In a sense, they were given the kind of crumbs from the white man's table, which gave them more hope — especially with the retention of the franchise, when it was being lost all over the country. They came into the Union of South Africa with something which the Asians didn't have and the Africans didn't have, and this gave them some privileged status, however illusory. So out of that comes a certain reluctance to take on the system. There's the hope that there are crumbs for you in the system.

But there is also a very strong insistence by other coloureds that the race categories are irrelevant and that one ought to transcend them — which is my position. On the other hand, the fact that for many years coloureds could own property, could become petty-bourgeois to some degree, was clearly a barrier against fusing both with the Africans in Nyanga and Langa [Cape townships], and also with the coloured working class. They were contemptuous of the coloureds who were hawking fish or vegetables in the street. So this stratification is very strong and there's no point in disputing it.

## ***Why was it that the the Unity Movement and the Teachers League had such appeal in the coloured community?***

That's self-evident: a most powerful formative influence in the coloured community was the teacher. So you really have to ask, how did the teachers get to be Trotskyist? That was through contact with the people at Cape Town University, who were Marxists but had formed the breakaway organization called the Spartacus Club, which consisted mainly of people who took a pro-Trotsky<sup>7</sup> position. If they were to define themselves, they would've said that they belong to the intelligentsia, out of whom a vanguard party would come. But it is quite true that the TLSA and the Anti-CAD and the Unity Movement tended to draw their support from educated coloureds and professionals, the teachers. ”

DENNIS BRUTUS, active in the Unity Movement-oriented Teachers League of South Africa (TLSA) in the Eastern Cape in the 1940s and 1950s

Ja, they - they - the - the richest farmers in the area were - were north of us - now we would meet but, you know, the Afrikaaner at those days was not like the Afrikaaner of today. You see, the Afrikaaner of those days they knew only two things - you are either a man or a skepsel - do you know what a speksel is?



CAPE TOWN'S DISTRICT SIX, ONE OF THE BEST-KNOWN COLOURED AREAS IN THE 1940S AND 1950S, WAS DECLARED WHITE AND DEMOLISHED BY THE 1960S. (PHOTOGRAPHER: UNKNOWN. SOURCE: UWC - ROBBER ISLAND MUSEUM MAYIBUYE ARCHIVES)

The sense of alienation from the mainstream of African-dominated resistance was a further impetus to separate coloured organization. The most significant of these groups, the Unity Movement, was led by an African, yet in terms of his background, he felt he had more in common with the coloured intellectuals who made up the majority of his constituency.

“ I happen to be a person born in a particular place in a particular way which is not typical of a black man's life in South Africa. First of all, my father came from people who could be called, not farmers, but landowners. You see, if you can imagine that milieu, I had no cause to be anti-anything, anti any white man. For me, there was nobody higher than my father.

You know, the Afrikaner in those days was not like the Afrikaner of today. Those days they knew only two things: you are either a man or a skepsel [creature]. If you possess the same things as they've got, then you are a man. My father was a farmer and was entitled to all the privileges of farmers.

***So when you went to school at Lovedale mission, was that the first time you mixed with coloureds and Indians?***

That's right. The other fellows came from the reserves, and some came from places where they were under chiefs and they believed in certain things — that kind of life which I did not know because I grew up on a farm. So I didn't know so much about the customs and that kind of thing — I had to come across this later, when I was older. Consequently, when I now met the coloured boys and the Indian boys, I took to them quite naturally because they lacked the same things that I lacked: you know, the tribal customs. My approach to the whole thing was intellectual.

***Your left-wing friends who attended the Cape Town political clubs, they were not Africans, generally?***

Of course not, ja.

***That didn't bother you, that there weren't many African people involved?***

Given my background, it didn't.

***Would you agree that Unity Movement supporters have tended to come from middleclass backgrounds?***

That was the very essence of it. You see, we said you cannot fight for socialism in the same way as England and Germany and so on — you have to have a national organization. That national organization was founded under the leadership of the petty bourgeoisie. It couldn't be otherwise, it had to be. The workers can't form an organization that's going to liberate itself of themselves — it has never happened anywhere in the world and it can't. Ideas come from the bourgeois class — even the ideas of socialism came from outside the workers, from the sense of the bourgeoisie. And it can't be otherwise.”

I.B. TABATA, President of the Unity Movement since its founding



A.S. Yes, oh, of course, you see - of course, you see, it's - it's not only - well, not only, you know, me, you know, who are prejudiced - even Coloureds are prejudiced against Africans and so on, you see, particularly those who, like us, were coming in there and so on, who have got, you know - they would - funny way of doing things - not urbanised but rural, and you get exposed quickly that this is a little bit of a stupid person -

In contrast to this view, a non-racial trade union movement had developed in the Western Cape in the 1940s. While many unions allowed their legal, separate, race-based branches to perpetuate coloured labour preference policy, some Cape unions — notably the Food and Canning Workers and the Stevedores and Dock Workers — managed to organize both coloured and African workers.

“ Well, coloureds were prejudiced against Africans, particularly those who were not urbanized but rural. First of all, we had no language with them: we speak Xhosa. More or less, they were people who were between whites and Africans, and some of them were extreme, very bad indeed, because they've got to shout more to compensate. But also ourselves, we never accepted them at first, until you know them.

You see, the trade union is very important. It's more important than political organization because there is the organization in the factory where you are equal, you are all workers. Somebody is being ill-treated by a foreman there in the presence of another one, and you're affected by this thing because tomorrow it's going to be you. It doesn't matter whether it's a white or a coloured or an African — you feel very bad. Because you are with this chap for eight hours and you talk to him — even though you don't know English sometimes, or Afrikaans — you develop a language of communication.

Whereas politics is completely different, particularly that time, because the ANG had not gone down to the masses of our people. We just followed because, well, we were oppressed. In other words, at first you regard some of the coloureds as similar to the whites, the way they're behaving and so on, but as you go along with them you learn how they are and you see that these are not whites, and as you go along they make friends with you.

***Can you tell me about your experience of organizing coloureds and Africans together in one union?***

The story that sticks in my mind is when we organized about 200 coloured women in a zip factory. At the time we had applied for conciliation board, so the union could be registered and they could apply for bargaining position. We went to these coloured women and said, 'Listen, now, it's more than a month the government has not answered your letter of applying for a conciliation board and therefore you've got the right to strike.' That thing was different to me: there were coloureds and I was the only African leading them. I was there at lunch-time and the plan was that even if the bell goes at two o'clock, we continue the meeting. And we continued our meeting as if nothing's happening. Of course, the police were called, and then of course they rush to me when they see an African, saying, 'You are arrested!'

They took me to Maitland Police Station, but after an hour I was rushed back to where I was because those coloured women were there demanding me: 'If that person is not back, that's the end of it, you might as well close this factory.' So you see what I mean: if workers are organized effectively, colour just disappears completely. Here I'm an African — and not even an articulate African at that time — but I was a symbol of unity to them and so they said,

'That chap must come back here.' I was brought back to them and then they went back to the factory and we won our strike — an African leading coloureds. You know, to me, it was a great thing indeed, because South Africa is organized in a segmented form and people find it difficult to follow people of other racial groups, but in the trade union movement these coloured women were prepared to follow an African person.

The trade union helps a great deal with this. For instance, people have been arrested — you see amongst the arrested people are whites. You know, once you organize for the people you will be arrested, whether you're white, pink or green. You understand that, you see it doesn't need a book, it's clear as A, B, C: when people in South Africa go on strike, the first thing they get is the police — they bash you. The government, it's just an organization created by those who have got money to protect themselves, and nothing else.

***So you found that was the kind of argument that made workers understand non-racialism?***

That's right, they learn. Politics are very understandable to people when there's a struggle. Even the question of racism itself, it's easy to understand. You don't have to be educated for that. And they know that Ray Alexander slept in the bloody rural fishing compounds in Saldanha Bay and other places with them, for organizing them — that is not lost.

That's why I'm always coming back to the trade unions, because trade unions bring you nearer all the time with the hot line. It's not a theoretical thing. You come closer to somebody's factory and your honesty is proved — whereas in politics you're not always challenging employers. The trade union, it's a school of politics, no doubt about it — it's wonderful.”

ZOLA ZEMBE, a migrant worker from the Eastern Cape who became a full-time trade unionist in Cape Town

of the Coloureds as similar to the whites, you see - you see, the way they're behaving and so on, you see - but as you go along with them and so on, you see, you - you - you learn to know, you see, how they are and so on, you see, that these are not whites, and - and as you go along, you see, they make friends with you and so on, and - and -



And also, you see, they do things with you and so on - it's a very important thing, this thing and so on - for instance,

You see, you know, that's why I'm always coming to the trade unions, because trade unions brings you nearer all the time with the hot line, you see - it's not a theoretical thing - you come closer to somebody's factory and your honesty is proved, you see, whereas in politics sometimes it's - you - you can stay for a long time if (?) you are arrested - if



AFRICAN AND COLOURED WORKERS AT THE 1945 FOOD AND CANNING WORKERS UNION CONFERENCE  
IN CAPE TOWN'S TRADES HALL.  
(PHOTOGRAPHER: UNKNOWN. SOURCE: UWC - ROBBEN ISLAND MUSEUM MAYIBUYE ARCHIVES)

NOTES:

The decades-old preference for coloured over African labour in the Western Cape was institutionalized by the 1955 Coloured Labour Preference Policy, which aimed to create a distinct 'coloured nation', according to Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd's Secretary of Native Affairs, W. W. Eiselen.

<sup>2</sup>For a thorough treatment of this theme, see Ian Goldin, *Making Race: The Politics and Economics of Coloured Identity in South Africa*, Longman, 1987.

<sup>3</sup>See Willie Hofmeyr, 'Agricultural Crisis and Rural Organization in the Cape, 1929-1933', MA thesis dissertation, University of Cape Town (UCT), 1985 for a discussion of the minimal impact on Cape politics of the Jamaican leader who advocated the emigration of African-Americans to Africa in the early twentieth century. Hofmeyr concludes that lack of enthusiasm for African separatism was due to the longstanding integration of coloureds into ANC structures in the Cape.

<sup>4</sup>The Independent ANC (IANC) was founded in Cape Town in late 1930 by militants opposed to the ANC's conservative leadership and was crushed by state repression in 1932. Hofmeyr (see previous note) characterizes the IANC's programme of action as 'the most militant to emerge out of the national movement until the late 1940s', and argues that 'the ease with which the Food and Canning Workers Union was later able to organize in the Western Cape rural areas suggests that at least some awareness of the value of organization had been developed' as a legacy of the militant elements of the ANC (Western Province) and the IANC.

<sup>5</sup>Most often simply called the Unity Movement.

<sup>6</sup>When the Nationalist government succeeded in removing coloured voters from the Cape common roll.

<sup>8</sup>According to Brutus, the Spartacus Club tried to get Leon Trotsky himself to adjudicate a debate on 'the relative importance in the revolutionary struggle of the peasantry versus the proletariat — whether the revolution would take its energy from the urban workers in Cape Town or the peasantry in Transkei'. Trotsky replied (Remarks on the Draft Theses of the Workers Party of S.A., 24 April 1935), vindicating the view that the peasantry was crucial, but adopting a far less dismissive approach towards the Black Republic policy of the CPSA and the ANC than his South African disciples. However, it was then alleged that the courier had doctored the document in transmission, so the debate raged on.