

THE BLACK SASH

NATAL COASTAL REGION

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L A M O N T V I L L E .

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A SPAN of half a century separates the crises that surrounded the 'birth' of the "native village" of LAMONT (as it was 'christened') in 1934 from the crises that climaxed in the township in 1983.

ALTHOUGH the circumstances in both historical instances differ there has been little fundamental change in the economic demands, the political forces (if, since 1948, under the guise and appellation of "apartheid") and social conditions that shape and determine black residential townships such as LAMONTVILLE.

PERIPHERALLY sited to the South West of Durban, between the sprawling African and Indian locations of Umlazi and Chatsworth respectively, LAMONTVILLE is still today a pool of cheap labour for the city's growing industrial needs. The township was in fact created in response to precisely such demands. Its creation, moreover, was intended to serve as a means also of stabilizing part (the part necessary to industry) of the massive influx of Africans whose 'push' out of a condition of systematic rural impoverishment was, at the same time, a 'pull' into the upsurge of secondary industry that followed in the wake of World War I.

THAT stability, for LAMONTVILLE as elsewhere, has however, proved largely illusory.

THE basic conflict of interest that essentially exists between (white) capital and (black) labour and the coercion, at state level, needed to control the source of that labour, the community, has made difficult of containment the antagonistic relations that necessarily result - as these past five turbulent decades amply illustrate.

THIS collusion of capital and state - with all the legislative machinery and law enforcement agencies at the latter's disposal inclusive of influx control, pass segregatory, security and denationalization laws, the army, police etc., etc., has been exclusively for the preservation of white power, wealth and privilege. By implication, the effective operation of the productive process, upon whose ownership white dominance is based, has correspondingly meant tight control of a voteless, largely rightless and, as far as possible, un-organized community/workforce.

AS the meagre wage packet of this workforce, given in exchange for its labour power, is sufficient only for its immediate sustenance state intervention, at this level also, is required. The provision of public goods and services that is a precondition for the maintenance, well-being and reproduction of labour thus becomes in principle at any rate, the responsibility of the state. Included in the category of "public" goods and services" are: schooling, recreational amenities, low income housing and medical facilities and so on.

NEVER in a black urban experience, however, has there been adequate state provision of any of these essential services. Such inadequacy, while it continues as a cancerous cause of social friction, must nevertheless be seen in the whole context of state strategy with its divisive tactics of rule by force if not by fiat. Such that, through the institutionalized regulation of employment, accommodation, education, recreation the urbanized black working population can be limited, contained, kept subservient and cheap - commensurate with continued economic growth and white capital accumulation.

SUCH then are the structural determinants underlying the violence whose eruption last year made LAMONTVILLE and its sister townships headline news.

THE immediate causes of the disturbances, however, were the perennial ones of, firstly, a rise in the price of public transport and, in the second instance, an increase in home rentals ; both of which led, as historically they have invariably done, to a boycott campaign. The third issue that likewise generated strong reaction from the majority of LAMONTVILLE residents was that of the township's proposed incorporation, along with Hambanathi, into Kwa-Zulu.

In accord with the underdevelopment of LAMONTVILLE and its like it is a measure of (white) societal greed and political opportunism that from the very inception of these segregated, dormitory areas a policy for their self-financing was initiated, in the first instance, by local authorities and later adopted by the central government itself. In this regard the infamous (its victims believe) "Durban System" became the nationally recognized model ; it in fact laid the parameters for a pattern of administrative control that, with certain cosmetic modifications, is still in operation to-day. As early as 1908 the Native Beer Act paved the way for the establishment, in Durban, of a "native" beer monopoly, the revenue from which was intended, ostensibly, to fund "native" housing and the infrastructure needed for the welfare of the urban African. In effect, the profit from "native" beer drinking went almost exclusively towards the creation of an elaborate and repressive system of administrative control. In the furtherance of this control it has become standard practice also to bolster the necessary funds with monies collected from rents, fines, registration fees, etc.,

THE urban African, in sum, has all along been made to pay for his/her own oppression - though not without protest and opposition. Resistance against an unjust and inequitable social order has indeed been a long and on-going one : trapped as the oppressed have always been in an insufferable situation of poverty and powerlessness and of total dependence therefore on their economic 'bosses' and political 'masters' for their very livelihood, their sub-economic homes, their subsidized public transport and the education (such as it is), health and welfare of themselves and their children.

THE whole environmental syndrome of these black, segregated, dormitory townships such as LAMONTVILLE bespeaks, in other words, of their parasitical nature and, in consequence of a structural inability to generate wealth. As opposed, this is to say, to the rich white cities that these black communities serve and wherein the symbiotic relationship that exists between the private (residential) and public (industrial) sectors ensures, through their economic dominance, the appropriation of all the wealth that the workers themselves, as the only real 'producers' have created.

FUNDAMENTAL, therefore, to the urban African's demands has been for a say in the decision making processes that, as indicated earlier, control all aspects of his/her life : a prime function of which would be provision for the fairer distribution of the economic 'cake', the social product' and a more just allocation of the country's resources, its riches and rewards.

IT is against this very briefly sketched background then that the recent troubles in LAMONTVILLE must be viewed.

TROUBLE first started in November, 1982, when the Durban Transport Management Board (DTMB) announced a 20% increase in busfares. The decision, taken by the Board at a time of deep economic recession, high inflation and rising unemployment would, it was argued by the community whose opinion once again was never sought, place an added financial burden on the majority of LAMONTVILLE'S indigent commuters. In vain the community protested this arbitrary imposition of the increase and the failure of members of their Community Council (with the notable exception of one, H.M. Dube) to appraise them of the situation and to defend their case. (Community Councils were introduced in 1977 and, from their inception, have enjoyed little legitimacy). A democratically elected, ad hoc Commuters Committee failed in its attempt to negotiate with the Management Board.

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Instead, the Committee was bluntly informed that the DTMB's decision was irreversible and then, on the basis that there could be no negotiations with a non-statutory body, it was contemptuously dismissed.

AND so, on the 1st December 1982, the boycott of DTMB buses began.

COMMUNITY feelings and fears, already in foment, were further inflamed when, in November also, it was learnt that for certain of Durban's adjacent townships there was to be a 25 - 85% rent hike the following year and that LAMONTVILLE, with a 90% increase, was to be hardest hit of all. (Since 1972 the running of these black townships had been taken over by the central government under the administration of Bantu Affairs Administration Boards - BAABs).

COUNCILLOR Harrison Msizi Dube, whose articulation of LAMONTVILLE's grievances had earned him the only respect accorded an otherwise discredited Council, had in the furtherance of his consistent and uncompromising stand against the Administration Board, become the epitome of a people's struggle for justice. Dube it was who, at this crucial stage, called into consultation the community; and at meetings around the township an opportunity was provided for the expression and dissemination of views and complaints relating to the rents issue; the deplorable condition of the township's houses, roads and pavements; its irregular sanitation service; and the inexplicable fact that whilst, through administrative failure, no maintenance work had been undertaken on rented homes the residents themselves had been forbidden to carry out any of the necessary repairs.

IT was at this stage too that an important new development emerged with the formation of a Joint Rent Action Committee - or JORAC as it is commonly called - comprising representatives from the Residents Associations of Hampanathi, Klaarwater and Shakaville and the Rent Action Committees of LAMONTVILLE and adjoining Chesterville, which township had likewise been experiencing severe problems and considerable community unrest. In addition, the townships' various hostels are also represented on JORAC.

INFLUENTIAL in getting this Committee started and a founder member, was H.M Dube. Tragically, however, his contribution was to be short-lived for on the 25th April this popular activist was assassinated, shot outside his own home by masked gunmen shortly after he had returned from a JORAC meeting. To the brutal murder of their hero the community reacted angrily, attacking (not for the first time) the home of Dube's arch-rival and Council colleague, Mr. Moonlight Gasa whom they suspected of complicity and who, after fleeing for his life then sought protection from the police. Gasa is still in police custody - but as a prisoner charged, with others, for Dube's murder.

THE rumour that a list was in circulation naming other community leaders in line for elimination further fanned the flames of violence that ripped through LAMONTVILLE leaving several suspected collaborators and informers dead and property extensively damaged. Damage to FNAB beer-halls alone amounted to R80 000 while a DTMB bus, completely gutted by fire, was valued at R45 000. Two FNAB buildings were also set alight, while further incidences of arson, sporadic stone throwing and the setting up of road blocks by angered youths all took their toll.

ALL the pent-up emotions and frustrations that is black experience in a segregated urban environment spilled over - the brittle surface of the social fabric had once again been breached. But worse was to follow.

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JORAC speeded up its activities. Already this energetic committee had sent petitions and memoranda to the PNAB and to the Minister of Co-operation and Development contesting the rent increase - scheduled for the 1st May - and the spurious claim by the Deputy Minister that "the increases were not rent but tariff increases for services" and therefore "unavoidable". Addressing a Press Conference Mr. Du Plessis of the PNAB even went so far as to state that were his department not to enforce the increases it would, he explained, "go bankrupt" !

IN the Supreme Court the Minister and the PNAB opposed an application, granted by Mr. Acting Justice Wilson, declaring the increases null and void. Mr. Justice Leon reserved judgement recommending that the increases be suspended until he had made a decision. The Durban Community Council (DCC) together with Inkatha had made the initial representation on the grounds that the Community Councils Act of 1977 had invested urban black authorities with powers equivalent to their local white counterparts ; and in agreement with the PNAB, and approved of by the Minister, the Council had been empowered to administer the allocation of accommodation and thus, specifically, to provide for the fixing of rentals.

MEANWHILE, in the townships themselves the people were being kept constantly in contact through organized mass meetings, while JORAC made further attempts to meet also with the PNAB. In a last ditch effort to defuse an untenable situation JORAC pleaded for an audience with the Minister of Co-operation and Development himself, Dr. Piet Koornhof. Ministerial approval for a three months suspension of the rents increases (effective from 1st May to 31st July) was finally granted.

DESPITE the moratorium, however, violence continued ; due largely to the hostile presence of a force of the police who, armed with a whole arsenal of tear gas, guns, dogs etc., moved in physically - and meta-physically - in order to harrass and intimidate into submission an already, and justifiably, enraged populace. Only through the outside intervention of progressive organizations and sympathizers and the timely exposure and publicity given the besieged inhabitants of LAMONTVILLE by members of the Progressive Federal Party (PFP) did the brutality, beatings, the insults, injuries, torture and damage eventually cease.

SUCH aggressive and provocative action on the part of a government agency inevitably led to acts of retaliation and revenge. There was, however, yet another dimension to the whole sordid story of embattled LAMONTVILLE. As oft times happens, a condition of general disorderliness unleashes a motiveless, unruly destructive element bent only on creating further chaos and disruption - but it was against this element too that the bruised, beleaguered LAMONTVILLE-ites had also to contend.

TO the tragic events of 1983 that cost the township dearly in life, limb and property a subsequent series of abortive meetings with the PNAB seemed the only official response the government and its lackeys appeared capable of making. The people of LAMONTVILLE, however, remained adamant that not only would they not, but that they could not pay the increased rents demanded. As their black and white T-shirts, always much in evidence, loudly proclaim (above an enlarged picture of Dube) "ASINAMALI" (We have no money).

LITTLE wonder then that, come August 1st., the residents of LAMONTVILLE should so readily have responded to the call for a boycott of the rent hikes. A prominent member of JORAC, Mr. Ian Mkhize, expressed their sentiments clearly when he told the Daily News : "We are not going to pay the rent increases. JORAC has pleaded with the authorities since March to halt the rent hikes and there has been much violence since then. We still do not have the money to pay the rent increases".

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While the clarity with which Mr. Mike Mabaso, also of JORAC, understood the machinations of the government as merely a ploy to force people to return to the 'homelands', thereby forfeiting their South African citizenship and urban rights, can best be summed up in his own words : "The rent increases," he said "are a strategy to put into effect the provisions of the Orderly Movement and Resettlement of Black Persons Bill before it has even gone through Parliament".

IF, to date, almost all of LAMONTVILLE'S 30,000 residents - crammed into 2,750 for the most part, sub-economic homes - are still paying the old rent, the PNAB is nevertheless reflecting the difference between the old and the new rent as an accumulating amount which the residents are being warned they will eventually have to pay. Further increases were announced for November and the following February, and on the 19th of November 56 dwellings were threatened with closure if their occupants continued to refuse paying the new rents. Although no major incidents have been recorded recently in any of the affected townships the situation in LAMONTVILLE, as elsewhere, remains - in the words of officialdom's jargon "tense but quiet".

MAYBE, but for LAMONTVILLE, as in varying degrees, with all of Durban's other affected areas, this quietude is merely a remission - for just so long as the exploitative system that created these black townships continues unchecked so to will their problems remain insurmountable.

IN the stalemate that followed the weeks and months of strife and violence focus shifted to the question of LAMONTVILLE and HAMBANATHI's incorporation into Kwa Zulu. A pronouncement to this effect was made by the Department of Co-operation and Development towards the end of August and, predictably, met with an angry rebuttal by the communities concerned who clearly perceived the retrogressive implications of such a tactic : not only would it mean the loss of their limited, if oftentimes hard won, Section 10 rights - in return, this is to say, for the dubious advantages of citizenship of an impecunious 'homeland', but it would, in effect, move them one step further away in the struggle for their full and rightful share of urban benefits.

THE transference of responsibility for black urban problems to yet another domain of the apartheid edifice (for all that 'domain's' informal 'independence') is merely the state's bogus attempt at conflict resolution.

RESISTANCE to the move has left the matter, if not its threat, in abeyance. As with the rents issue so too will this resistance to incorporation very largely depend upon the degree of class consciousness and the extent of ideological cohesion that can be maintained in the face of co-optive and reformist strategies employed by the state to deflect and subvert any organized action towards meaningful social change.