

South Africa a "parody of democracy"

Twentieth-century slavery

by Gordon Turtle

The apartheid system in South Africa is a "parody of democracy," about 50 students were told Friday.

Speaker George Poonen of the South African Congress of Trade Unions and a representative of the African National Congress of South Africa, (ANC), outlined the reaction to the recent "reforms" enacted in South Africa at a Students' Union forum. "The changes that we read about in the paper are no change at all in the apartheid regime," concluded Poonen.

Poonen illustrated how the newest government laws restrict the formation of black trade unions. Blacks have been allowed to form their own unions, with all black employees eligible to become members. The catch comes with the definition of "employee."

To qualify as prospective members of a trade union, black workers must be residents of the urban center in which they work. Roughly more than one third of urban workers are not residents of the cities, but are commuting workers from the bantustans, which are regions of South Africa where unemployed blacks as well as women and children are sent. These commuting workers are given yearly work passes, and are shipped home at the end of each year, when their contracts are either terminated or renewed, depending on individual worth to employers.

Poonen pointed out that the government's claim of free black unionism is a farce on two counts. First of all, if only the urban workers can unionize, that leaves out the majority of black workers, who work in the mines in rural areas or on farms.

Secondly, only the residents of cities are allowed to join these unions, and roughly 35% of the blacks working in cities do not have permanent residence in the areas where they are employed.

Furthermore, the formation of any black trade union has to be approved by a government official. This official may veto the development of any union which seems dangerous to the government. As well, white unions can refuse to accept representation from certain black unions on industrial councils,

which are the principal institution of industrial relations.

The facade of employee rights for blacks in South Africa has been packaged and sold to the rest of the world by the government-controlled media of the country, said Poonen. Besides heavily censoring its internal media, the South African government monitors all external communications made by foreign

journalists to their respective nations. Through this close scrutiny of what is said about them, much of the outside world is being convinced that the government of South Africa is liberalizing its policies.

Not so, said Poonen. While the obvious symbols of apartheid such as segregated washrooms may be slowly disappearing, the real crimes of apartheid are not. Eighty-seven per cent of the total land in South Africa is still reserved for the white, British-based minority, while all blacks not of use to the whites are sent to the Bantustans, which comprise 13% of the country's area. This 13 per cent is the poor, unarable areas, where farming on a domestic or business level is virtually impossible.

Further, free education is provided for the children of whites, but blacks must pay a school fee if they wish their children to attend, said Poonen. Most blacks cannot afford to feed and clothe their children, much less send them to school. It is estimated that 70 per cent of all black South African children die of malnutrition before they are 13 years old.

Blacks are stifled at every turn when they try to improve their situation through organization and protest, according to Poonen. Blacks may be arrested without formal charges, detained in jail without trial for up to eighty days, and told where they can and can not live. Blacks employed in the white cities are forced to carry an identity pass, and are arrested if they are stopped by police without a pass. The current unionization laws prohibit meaningful organization by the blacks, and, at any time, the government may disband a trade union. Poonen called South Africa "a police state practicing oppression on a scale unequalled since the time of Nazi Germany". An interesting comparison, since the leaders of the governing Nationalist Party, in power since 1948, were open and active pro-Nazi sympathizers.

At the root of the apartheid system is the bantustan policy. An article in *Southern Africa* magazine from September 1979, sums up that situation:

Under this system, 13 per cent of the land area is allocated to the 80 per cent divided among eight "tribal groups." Every African is assigned to one of these groups, and it is with this group, located on a fragmented, isolated, and often desolate bantustan, that each individual is supposed to identify. There are no African South Africans left, only Zulus, or Xhosa, or Tswana, whose country is some "independent homelands" undergoing "separate development."



George Poonen of the ANC

Photo N.F. Goode

The ultimate in black dispossession, the bantustan policy is a strategy guaranteed to supply the economy with the one resource that cannot be taken from the blacks: their labor power.

That black labor power is fully exploited by the white rulers seems obvious. During Friday's forum a film titled *Apartheid Inside and Out* was shown, and one facet of apartheid studied in the film was the agrarian labor system. Resembling nothing so much as a slave-worked plantation of American history, the large, privately-owned farms of South Africa employ black tenant-laborers through an archaic form of feudalism.

Farm laborers are paid barely enough to pay for their existence in farm-owned shacks. While the farmer-businessman of South Africa enjoys a very high standard of living, his workers are paid a pittance and live their lives in abject poverty. On many wine farms, workers are paid in alcohol that is produced on the farms, promoting alcoholism that makes the worker dependent on his employers.

Boycotts

A common question asked of George Poonen is what outside nations and individuals can do to help the cause of black liberation in South Africa. People's role is twofold: financial support for black organizations, and economic boycotts and sanctions on South African products.

The following North American businesses have a vested interest in the continued exploitation of black South Africans because of their financial investment in the country: Weston Foods Ltd., Ford Motor Co., General Motors, Fram Filters, INCO, Massey-Ferguson, Hudson's Bay Co., Noranda Mines Ltd., Alcan, Canadian Pacific, Carling O'Keefe, Maclean-Hunter, and Falconbridge Mines, to name but a few. Poonen and Joe Saloojee, a Canadian representative of the ANC, both urge Canadians to boycott products from these companies, until their complicity

in South African apartheid is ended.

A common argument used against the support of boycotts is that any decreased business to firms being boycotted will result in even more hardship for the black workers. Poonen disagreed with this argument.

"The ANC supports the boycott of all products coming from international businesses that have interests in South Africa," said Poonen. "70% of our children are starving; it can't get any worse."

Poonen and Saloojee both said the forced removal of international interests in their country will in the long run prove beneficial, even if the initial reaction is further unemployment among blacks. Saloojee emphatically supported boycotts aimed at these businesses, pointing out that boycotts serve another purpose by drawing public attention to the South African situation and the companies exploiting the cheap labor in the country.

The apartheid structure of South Africa is not disappearing. While the consciences of many are being appeased somewhat by the latest series of "reforms" being publicized, the hard facts remain. Poonen himself spent eighteen months in jail for union organizing, and many of his friends have been forced to flee South Africa because of threats of torture and execution.

It's not a pleasant thought to realize that in the latter part of the twentieth century, a state like South Africa continues to exist. Friday's SU forum brought to light several aspects of the problem.

Poonen and Saloojee stress that it is up to the rest of world to apply economic and diplomatic pressure on the government of South Africa to end its style of rule immediately. It is up to the citizens of these countries to demand their governments act on behalf of the most basic human rights. Our help is required to make South Africa, as Poonen concluded, "a country that belongs to its people."



ALL HUMAN BEINGS ARE BORN EQUAL....
BUT IN SOUTH AFRICA....

	WHITES	BLACKS
-population	4,500,000	19,000,000
-land allocation	87%	13%
-share of ntnl. income	75%	less than 20%
-ratio of av. earnings	14	1
-minimum tax. income	750 rand	360 rand
-doctors/population	1 for 400	1 for 44,000
-infant mortality rate	27 per 1000	200 per 1000 (urban) 400 per 1000 (rural)
-annual expenditure on education per pupil	\$696	\$45
-pupils/teacher ratio	1 for 22	1 for 60
-university students	84,000	6,300
-members of parliament	169	0
-prison population	3,250	63,726