

Labor violence fast rising



by Mike Walker

"Instead of fighting racism in South Africa, multinational corporations are approving it," said an exiled South African labor leader, Thursday.

Thozamile Botha, leader of a strike last year against the Ford Motor Company in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, spoke at a forum sponsored by the Edmonton Free Southern Africa Committee.

Botha urged both Canadians and their government to impose full economic sanctions against South Africa and to force Canadian controlled corporations to stop their exploitation of South African blacks under the apartheid system.

"The South African government in its attempt to subjugate the black people is assisted to a very large extent by foreign governments and multinational corporations," he said.

Botha related the story of his activities at Ford of South Africa, a subsidiary of Ford of Canada, and his arrest, detention and eventual exile from his country.

In October 1979 he was elected chairman of the newly formed Port Elizabeth Black Civic Organization (PEBCO). PEBCO's major concerns were home ownership for blacks and opposition to rent increases and the government's homelands policy.

Under the homelands system, blacks and whites are segregated by resettling blacks to 'homelands' removed from white residential centers. "The bantustans (homelands) were formed to alienate all the black people from 87 percent of the land (reserved for the whites)," Botha said.

Both PEBCO and Botha were unpopular with the South African authorities. In speeches before audiences of thousands, Botha called for full citizenship for blacks and for the release of political prisoners like Nelson Mandela to lead South Africans to freedom.

Only a few weeks after PEBCO's formation, Ford Motor Company of South Africa, for which Botha worked as a trainee draftsman, gave Botha an ultimatum: either his job or his involvement with PEBCO must go.

Botha resigned.

The next day, 700 Ford workers walked out, demanding my reinstatement," Botha said. Three days later, he was reinstated with pay.

However, the three-day strike prompted black workers to voice long-standing grievances. Almost immediately after Botha's

reinstatement, black workers demanded Ford reform its operations.

"They were demanding total scrapping of job reservations (along race lines) within the plant...equal pay for equal work... blacks promoted to top posts," Botha said. "Blacks are doing the same work as whites but for one quarter of the wage earned by whites," he said later.

When Ford did not respond, the workers walked out again. At the same time, Botha said, 500 workers at another Ford plant and 700 at General Tire and Rubber walked out.

Ford still did not acknowledge the strikers' demands. Instead it called in the police.

In addition, the United Auto Workers, (UAW), the Ford Workers' Union and an affiliate of the American UAW steered clear of the strike.

"The UAW refused to negotiate on behalf of strikers because it was a political strike, so they said," said Botha.

Ford offered to reinstate the strikers, but without seniority or pay.

Weeks later, on January 9, Ford agreed to reinstate the strikers unconditionally. However, their grievances remained. By this time they were happy just to get back to work.

The incident was not over for Botha, though.

"The next day I was arrested under the Terrorism Act," he said. "I was detained 48 days, then banned."

A banned South African cannot work, cannot go to school or university, cannot meet more than one person in public at one time and must be indoors from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. and all day on holidays.

In May, Botha left. Now he cannot go back.

He went to Lesotho, a neighboring country and joined the African National Congress of South Africa (ANC) and the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU).

He found that his struggle at

Ford was only "a continuation of a larger struggle that has been fought throughout the ages since South Africa was colonized," he said. "People have fought and died... for the total overthrow of the fascist regime."

"There is a widening gap between the races," Botha said, "between black and white wages and living conditions."

The international business community and many Western nations "have a vested interest" in the continued oppression of South African blacks, he said.

"The people of South Africa have appealed to the international community for support. But it has not come."

He chided the United States for not taking a stand on U.S. corporations' operations in South Africa.

"The U.S. has disinvested from Cuba and China," he said. "Why can't they divest in South Africa?"

Despite the passion of his attack, Botha seemed to have little hope for real help from the West.

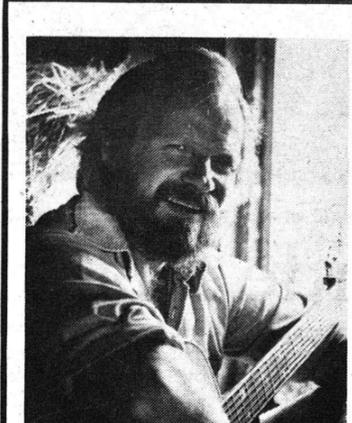
"We have exhausted all efforts," he said. "We must forget about peaceful change in South Africa. We are now dying without fighting because we have no arms. But we shall continue fighting."

He cited last year's sabotage of the SASOL (South Africa Synthetic Oil Limited) synthetic oil plant as something the future will see more of. That sabotage struck at the heart of the South African system, both geographically and economically.

Multinational corporations will not escape when South Africans take control of their country, Botha said.

"We shall take over the multinational corporations too because they are part of the system that exploits our people," he said.

"They are built on the backs and the blood of Africans."



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