



At the end of the 18th century, the revolutionaries of San Domingo kindled the hopes of the Caribbean black slave masses. In a bloody civil war the slave armies smashed the grandiose designs of French and British imperialism and established the first 'modern' free black state.

Like the present day black workers of South Africa they were chained to an oppressor race, in particular the white slave-owners and merchant traders of French colonialism. They suffered inhuman conditions and horrific cruelty at the hands of the 'enlightened' Europeans. The brutal births of the workers' states appear tranquil in comparison to the actions of the grotesque midwives of capitalism.

As the emergent capitalist class stretched its claws out to the five continents for cheap material and new markets it wrought a miserable effect on the native peoples. James tells of the genocide, incarceration and torture inflicted on the tribal groups in Equatorial Africa. Local economies were distorted into dependence on the exploitation of particular commodities or on the slave trade itself. 'Tribal life was broken up and millions of detribalised Africans were let loose upon each other. The unceasing destruction of crops led to cannibalism; the captive women became concubines and degraded the status of the wife. Tribes had to supply slaves or be sold as slaves themselves....'

Slavery

The cause of profit treads on every idea of morality. Transportation to the West Indies was dictated by the need to fit as many into the sailing ships as could fit. The conditions often led to slaves committing suicide by jumping overboard or by strangulation using their own chains. 'No Europeans could stay in (the hold) for more than a quarter of an hour without fainting', but for the manacled slaves, 'The close proximity of so many naked human beings, their bruised and festering flesh, the foetid air, the prevailing dysentery, the accumulation of filth, turned these holds into a hell'.

Imperialism thrived off the slave trade, cheap labour meant cheap goods and high profits. Paris and London, Bristol and Marseilles, swarmed with easy wealth. San Domingo also grew rich off its plantations and traders. It became the wealthiest colony in the world. The capitalists were capable of standing up with the wealthiest of French capitalists. Rising up on the black slaves, the colonists lived luxuriously. In San Domingo they built great palaces, ate sumptuous foods and staged magnificent balls for the international ruling classes.

Outside their world was that of the masses, the poor whites, the mulattoes and the black slaves. Pre-revolutionary times found them in a 'caste' system even more intricate than that in South Africa. At the top was the French bureaucracy,

Last year's Soweto riots indicate that the South African ruling class is beginning to lose its hold on the black workers.

As wave after wave of attacks are unleashed on the South African capitalists and their apartheid regime, revolutionary movement will threaten the whole system.

However, the struggle of the black proletariat to overcome the semi-slavery must take into account the white workers.

C.L.R. James' book "Black Jacobins" on the slave rebellion and revolution gives an insight into how the problem was taken up by the black revolutionaries almost 200 years ago in the French colony of San Domingo. The ex-Marxist James also gives a revealing insight into the conditions of slavery and the effect of the French revolution on the working classes. The black slaves' conditions were similar to those of the huge South African black proletariat. For this reason the book reviewed by PHIL FRAMPTON indicates some of the possible developments likely in the South African revolution.

then the white bourgeoisie. Below these were the small whites, then the mulattoes (half-castes), then the black servants, then the slaves. But within the mulattoes, 'They divided the offspring of white and black into 128 divisions. The true mulatto was the child of the pure black and the pure white. The child of the white and the mulatto woman was a quarter with 96 parts white and 32 parts black. But the quarter could be produced by the white and the maribou.... But the sang-melee with 127 white parts and one black part was still a man of colour (mulatto)'.

Some of the poor whites were the descendants of the earlier white slaves, but they were few as they had failed to work efficiently in the tropical conditions; the black slaves had been drafted in as replacements. Others were escaped convicts, bankrupts and the scum of French society. In San Domingo they were the petit bourgeoisie, the small traders, tailors, shopkeepers, cobblers etc. All had slaves/servants.

Revolution

Beneath these were the mulattoes who, despite being two league boots below the whites in terms of the law, had become a major threat. Though some were enslaved, others had become wealthy landowners and proprietors. They were symptomatic of the decaying French empire. The breakdown of social morality, often a sign of the collapse of the social order, meant that the white master would often give children to secret (and later open) black mistresses. Their children had to be treated a bit better. After all, they had some white blood! The mulattoes group grew and grew as their decadent French rulers satisfied their desires. By 1789, 5,000 of the 8,000 mulatto women in Le Cap were prostitutes or kept mistresses.

At the bottom of the pile were the black slaves, of whom James says, 'Their masters poured burning wax on their hands and arms and shoulders, emptied the boiling sugar cane over their heads, burned them alive, roasted them on slow fires, filled them with gunpowder and blew them up with a match, buried them up to the neck and smeared their heads with sugar that the flies might devour them....' It shouldn't be necessary to relate

the other conditions of employment!

In a decade this society was heaved into new forms. As the thunder of revolution rolled from the new world to the old, from America to France and Ireland, to Britain and Germany, the struggles of the workers, peasants and soldiers bust the old order apart. New ideas streamed out of the revolutions: Tom Paine, 'The Rights of Man', 'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity', the Republic. From America and France, across the Atlantic came ripples of insurgency which shook San Domingo.

In 1791 the slaves rose up swearing to destroy the whites and their plantations. This was the inevitable taking of revenge for years of oppression. For the whippings and beatings, the torture and mutilations, the scarred and famished blacks bore a bitterness which would never be completely erased. While the whites killed 30 slaves a day in Port-au-Prince on 'the wheel', the slave stockades were lined with the heads of whites.

The plantations were set on fire. 'For nearly three weeks the people of Le Cap could barely distinguish day from night, while a rain of burning cane.... flew over the city.'

But as the slaves began to take control of sections of the island, the likes of L'Ouverture recognised that it was necessary for the illiterate black slaves to use the plantation managers and the mulattoes and small whites to help run the free black zone economy.

Previous rebellions and the elaborate plans of their leaders had been crushed but history has the habit of occasionally throwing up leaders who are capable of meeting the particular conditions and articulating and guiding the str-

uggles of their class. L'Ouverture was to take the illiterate slaves to independence, defeating the British, French and Spanish war machines on the way. He was able to achieve victory through a strategy of resolute struggle and skilful concessions, drawing in allies to ease the black peoples' path to independence. Most important, when leader of the slave army he made it clear that they would never compromise on the question of their liberty. For some time he was capable of showing mulattoes and even the small whites that it was in their interests to side with the slaves. Consequently he turned what appeared to be a race war into a war of the classes.



Soweto school children in revolt

The whites were encouraged to co-operate. He didn't seek unity on any joint programme but showed the whites that the slaves, far from being out to destroy them, were ready to exist side by side with them. The planters who remained in the occupied zones could retain their property providing the plantation labourers received one quarter of the receipts etc. All the traders could continue in their work. Even their occasional insurrections and plots were dealt with leniently. For the whites he 'forbade all pillage and destruction by his own soldiers, and addressed a series of proclamations promising them forgiveness... if they would be faithful...'

Still he was continually vigilant of these sections who wavered throughout the civil war, greeting one victory then the other with flowers, parades and courtesies. The slaves threatened them with loss of privilege, the French bourgeoisie hovered over them for debts.

This strategy gave strength to the blacks' struggle. Though in the last stage of the war the whites were to side with Bonaparte's counter-revolution, cut open the stomachs of slaves and set dogs upon them,

victorious and to this day they have resisted colonialism.

The problems of the black workers' struggle in South Africa today especially those relating to the question of the white workers are similar to those which faced L'Ouverture. It is a truism to say that the South African revolution will not follow the same path but the general method adopted by L'Ouverture will have to be followed if the white workers are not to be put in a corner.

Under the conditions of apartheid the white workers are an intermediate strata in society. The income differential between black and white workers is between 4 and 20 to 1. Compare the UK higher executives to the busmen. They will feel that the ending of apartheid is a threat, but with the onslaught of the black proletarian revolution and the readiness of the military-police state to use them as a battering ram, they will be forced to reconsider their position. Capitalism will be able to hand out nothing but ruin for the white workers. As they begin to understand this, a friendly but firm offer of joint action from the black workers will attract sections. The whites will be told, 'we have no wish to fight you, only the regime which some of you defend.' Racism has no place in the proletarian struggle. For this reason the possibilities of power will evoke a questioning of the role of white workers in society.

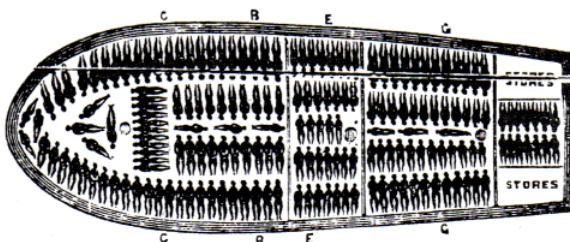
Their training and skills will be indispensable, their social weight in the revolutionary turmoil will have to be taken into account.

Some so-called revolutionaries talk of driving the whites into the sea, of a race war. If such a programme were implemented the white workers would be driven even closer to the regime giving it a mass basis. The fierceness of apartheid oppression may mean that such talk will find a response in the early stages of an upheaval but the black workers will soon dismiss such an approach.

South Africa

On the other hand, the slogan of black and white workers unite will at this stage reap scorn from the wage slaves of apartheid. They understand that the relatively idyllic life of the whites means they see no need for a common struggle. It will be the struggles of the black proletariat and their programme which will win over or at least neutralise the whites. As in San Domingo the black workers will have to fight on an independent programme, not tying themselves to any vacillating sections.

The blacks of San Domingo finally drove off the British (who lost 100,000 men) and the forces of Bonaparte. Imperialism extracted a massive cost, at the end of the war 25% of the population had died, production was wrecked and a bitter racial scar left behind. Bonaparte invaded and murdered many of the slaves. As a result the whites were exterminated. L'Ouverture was arrested and murdered. Falling for that trick was the last mistake he made. He made others but as the book indicates he made a great contribution to the workers of the world.



During the slave-trade, from which Britain profited handsomely, ships were specially designed to pack in the maximum number of slaves in appalling conditions.