A PLACE IN THE CITY – The Rand on the eve of Apartheid

by Luli Callinicos,(Ravan, Johannesburg)

*Reviewed by Langa Zita**

At a Fordsburg ANC branch premiere of Spike Lee's movie "Malcolm X", the chairperson of the branch, an African, introduced three leading members of the democratic movement from the Indian community, including the SACP's Essop Pahad.

Common prejudice defines the Indian community as conservative, yet here was an audience, represented by both young and old, who were listening attentively to a communist, Essop Pahad, as he related stories about his life and his experiences with the recently assassinated Chris Hani and the late OR Tambo. Callinicos's book, A PLACE IN THE CITY, did much to understand this.

The book is about a particular moment, the decade of the forties, how that decade was experienced by ordinary working class South Africans and how their struggles and defeats gave rise to the apartheid state. Gleaned from the lives of six working class South Africans, it gives a picture of how the process of industrialisation emerged and how people responded to it.

The stories

Martha Masina, daughter of a labour tenant, was twenty-one years old when she left her share cropper family in Middelburg to go to Johannesburg in 1939. Hers was an escape from the despotism of Oom Piet on whose farm the family stayed and to whom they had to offer six months of unpaid labour in return for accommodation. Masina was destined to spend 50 years in the back yards of the world of madams.

Hendrik Hoffman arrived in Johannesburg from the Orange Free State at a time when the "once huge tracts of land owned by the Boers in the nineteenth century were shrinking steadily as the farms were divided up to provide for each generation of sons". Drought and the depression of the early 30s was the culprit that forced him to leave his beloved home. As a white worker, Hoffman experienced both the deprivations of his class and the protective shell of racism.

For teenager Naboth Mokgathle, it was not only economic dictates that forced him to leave his village of Phokeng in Rustenburg, but also adventure and the predominant myths and legends about the world of the proletariat. He made use of his 15-day permit to find a job in Pretoria and later, found himself drawn to the many struggles of this era as a trade unionist and a Communist Party member in Pretoria.

Life for Ama Naidoo, wife of activist Naran Naidoo, meant reconciling her activities as housewife to a number of economic activities to make ends meet. Through her we are able to see, not only her adaptation to a challenging environment, but also the activism of her husband who was able to develop a community consciousness in his area whilst playing a leading role in his union, in the Transvaal Indian Congress as well as in the Communist Party. The Fordsburg premiere was, to me, part of this radical thread, whose steadfastness undermined the tricameral sellout.

There is also the story of Katerina le Roux,

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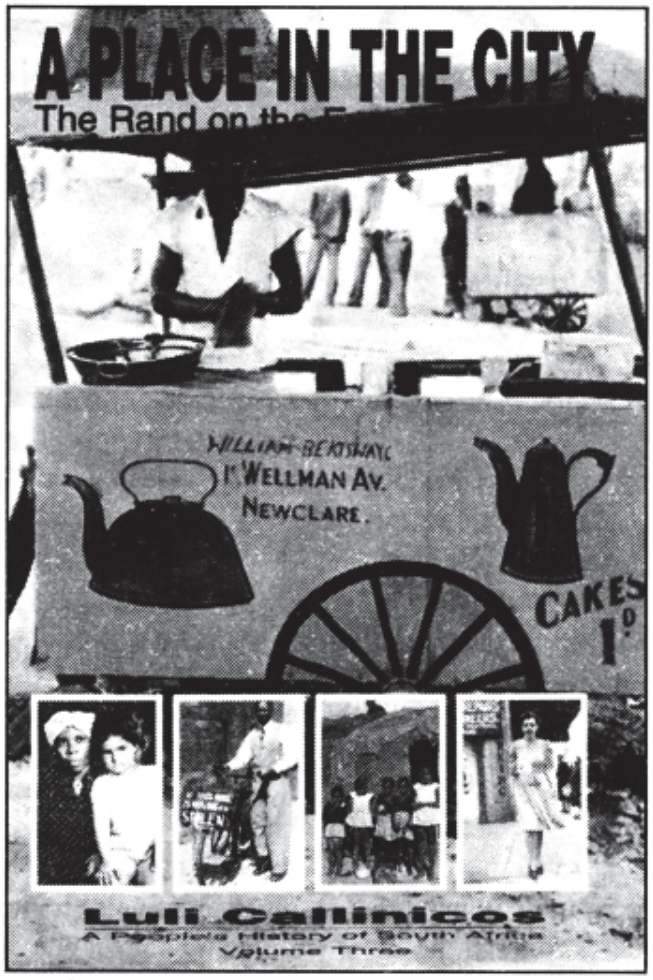
displaced from the platteland. Le Roux joins the Garment Workers' Union, which was ably led by communist Solly Sachs. She initially admires Sachs's leadership qualities, but with promotion and the perks of a white labour aristocracy, increasingly finds his politics uncomfortable. Finally, there is the story of Seketi Molewa from Sekhukhuneland, who fails to embrace the urban world, is alienated from it and consistently maintains a rural outlook and remains a migrant worker throughout his life.



Through the chronicle of these workers' lives, one is able to discern the slow yet definite development of political struggle against the bosses and the state by the black protagonists, whilst a contradictory process of struggle and co-option characterises the white working class's response to the class question.

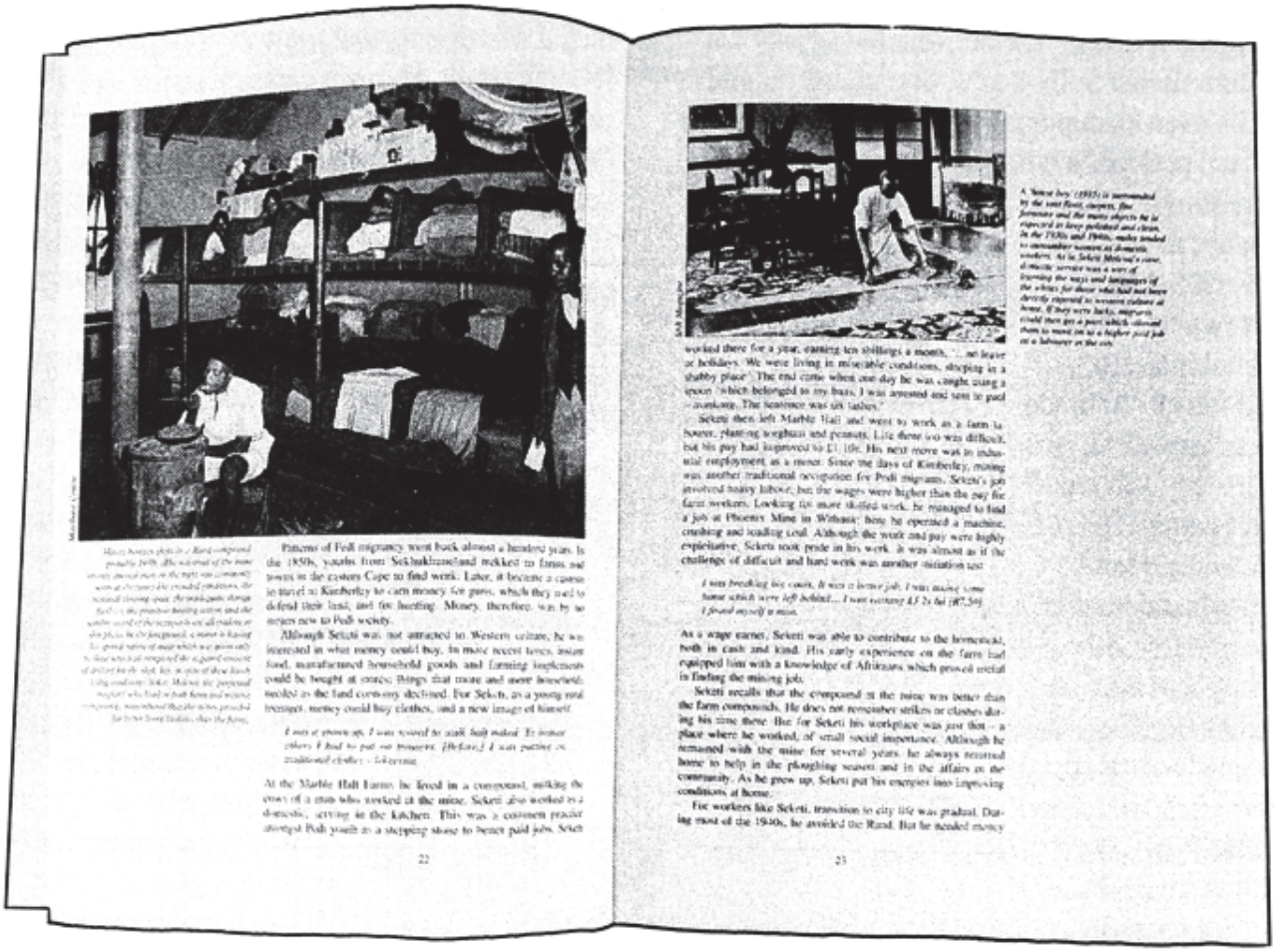
The struggles

Against the background of the individual stories, A PLACE IN THE CITY describes and analyses the events that were shaping the country at the time.

White South Africa, in both its liberal and racist wings, found it convenient and profitable to consider Africans as "temporary sojourners" in the cities, and subsequently took no heed of their needs as urban communities. The result was the emergence of a number of bread and butter struggles, mainly over transport and housing.

The Sofasonke Party of James Mpanza was the most illustrious of a general movement of illegal settlements that grew overnight around Johannesburg. Mpanza was a populist and able orator, the only non-communist member of the Orlando Advisory Board, whose "call to a landless people struck a deep seated feeling and attracted a devout following in the 20 000 people who heeded his call". Whilst the ANC was able to detect the potential of the movement, the same cannot be said for the Communist Party of South Africa CPSA which moved from suspicion of the Sofasonke movement to outright maltreatment of Mpanza. However, this episode appears to have been a dark cloud in a silver period for the party, which was at the centre of almost all the struggles that were unfolding at this time. Two struggles highlight the CPSA's role: the Alexandra Bus Boycott and the school boycott in support of party activist David Bopape.

Alex was one of the most 'liberal' places on the Rand, being a black freehold area, and, according to Mrs S "a very good place for poor people". A number of attempts by the government were made to threaten and intimidate Alex residents. It was, however, the two penny hike in bus fares that catapulted the community into a struggle with the black and white (majority) bus owners. The struggle, a boycott against the bus companies, was led by a local CPSA leader, Gaur Radebe (also ANC Transvaal leader) and was able, after a protracted period of four years, to force the



companies to lower the fares and the city council to subsidise them.

Bopape came to Brakpan as a teacher from the north and immediately immersed himself in the daily concerns of the community, joining the CPSA in 1940 and becoming a leader of the Brakpan Residents' Association. His prestige was seen as a threat by the Brakpan Council, which sacked him. The act angered the community so much that parents called for a school boycott and marched to have the decision changed, to no avail.

The advisory boards of the time were the only political outlet for the disenfranchised urban Africans, as they had some measure of control over the delivery of services. It is interesting to note that while these bodies were designed for co-option, they were used effectively as channels of struggle by the communists. It is also testimony to the effectiveness of the CPSA at this time that it was the major force on all the boards throughout the country. This was a tactic that had its critics, especially from sections of the Trotskyite movement who saw it as collaboration.

The decade was also characterised by changes in the ideology of the ANC, as the movement's politics moved towards Africanism and later towards radical non-racialism and a militant political practice spearheaded by the ANC Youth League. High points of this era are well-known.

The CPSA was also a co-author of this process. Guided by the Kotane slogan,"nationalist in form socialist in content", the party, according Elias Motsoaledi, "encouraged us to join the national liberatory movement to give it a progressive outlook and lead it-to make it the mass movement it supposed to be". It remains to be seen to what extent is the socialist content of the national movement is being contested today?

On the shopfloor, a number of unrecognised black unions emerged at this time, with the majority of unions under CNETU, and together registering the highest number of members since the days of the ICU. Several factors facilitated this development. Employment space was

created by the participation of white workers in the war. A war economy needed a relatively stable work force and some semiskilled jobs were taken up by African workers. The special conditions of the period and the role played by the Soviet Union in the war, saw some accommodation between the ruling class and the CPSA. On a number of occasions Gana Makabeni, a CPSA trade unionist, was called upon to mediate some of the spontaneous strikes that were rampant at the time. These special conditions helped to raise the wages of the black workers. It is also interesting to note that as a result of these developments, two commissions even recommended the extension of worker rights to African workers.

The situation of white (Afrikaner) workers was different. Having benefitted from the welfarism of the Pact government of Hertzog in the 1920s and beyond, they were already en route towards becoming a racist labour aristocracy highly insulated by the state and by craft protection from the rigours of the market. Spurred on by neo-Nazi organisations such as the Ossewa Brandwag and the Nationalist Party, the white working class threw its weight behind the racist agenda that led to the victory of the Nationalist Party.

Callinicos describes how what little was left of class solidarity across the colour line at the time was seriously undermined, partly as a result of the advances made by the black working class and the discrimination endured by the Afrikaners (for their general opposition to the war).

Simple and impressive

Callinicos's book is written in the simple and accessible style that has become her trademark. This impressive book successfully captures the mosaic of the process of proletarianisation in South Africa, as it reflects on themes of utmost and present relevance.

She ably shows that the racial divisions in the working class are not insurmountable and that, at certain moments, white garment workers were willing to defend their black sisters (even if with paternalistic undertones and with little endurance) – something we can build upon today.

The book also covers a period that can, in all fairness, be described as the highest point in the history of the Communist Party, indicating the potential that exists for the party in these open times. Communists in the 40s were everywhere: in bus boycotts, in massacres, and in trade unions. They were, without doubt, the epicentre and leading force of the popular struggles of this period.

Callinicos must also be congratulated for her consistency, and the continuity of this book with her previous works.The same cannot be said of her peers in other fields of study- such as economics, a field in which so many have eaten their words . One would hope that in her case, it is an assertion that earlier questions (and their answers) are still-unresolved structural apartheid and her twin sister capitalism will outlive Codesa.

Two issues

There are however two points that I would like to take issue with. Recently, socialist Baruch Hirson's book "Yours for the Union: Class and Community Struggles in South Africa, 1930-1947" (1991) highlighted the important role played by Max Gordon (a Trotskyite) in rebuilding the African trade unions in the 40s. A greater assertion and discussion of his role could have been useful in the light of the prominence (justified as it is) given to the CPSA leadership of this time.

Secondly, there is some debate about the strength of the black working class in this period. For example, Fine and Davis in "Beyond Apartheid – Labour and Liberation in South Africa" (1991) argue that the weakness, rather than the strength, of this class was the main condition for the rise of apartheid. Callinicos's view on both these questions would have been very useful.

A PLACE IN THE CITY will occupy a place on the reading lists of all those interested in and all who are part of the South African working class movement. It should be prescribed reading in all the structures of the democratic movement. ☆