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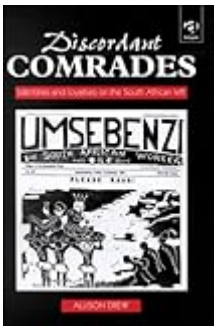

Allison Drew. *Discordant Comrades: Identities and Loyalties on the South African Left.* Aldershot and Burlington, Vt: Ashgate, 2000. viii +309 pp. Â£43.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7546-0195-1.

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Allison Drew's *Discordant Comrades* makes an important addition to the history of left politics in South Africa. It includes chapters on early socialists, on the origins of Trotskyism, and on attempts at building black and left unity in the 1930s. Its core, however, consists of an account of the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA), from its formation in 1921 to its dissolution in 1950. Its real value lies in the original and extensive use of relevant Comintern archives (though Drew has also unearthed other new sources). As such, it will be essential reading, as much for serious students of the Communist International as for South African historians.

The best chapters are those concerned with the CPSA's middle years, from 1927 through to the mid-1930s. During this period, there was heightened Comintern interest in South African affairs, though, as Drew shows, its impact was largely negative. At the end of 1927, the party was enjoying considerable success. Having worked effectively within the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union, it was now building unions that would soon constitute the Federation of Non-European Trade Unions. Whilst the Central Executive was still largely white, the overwhelming majority of the members were now black, as were some of the key leaders, including William Thibedi, who had participated in the party's formation (and is given due prominence in this volume), and Jimmy La Guma. In February and March 1928, the party leadership considered the Comintern's proposal that the CPSA should, henceforward, strive for 'an independent native republic, as a stage towards a workers' and peasants' government.'

As Drew notes, this Native Republic thesis was part of the Comintern's common approach to the United States and South Africa (one which, according to Ed Johanningsmeier, in a forthcoming article, was strongly influenced by African American communists).[1] The new line was initially opposed by the majority of the South African leadership, including Sidney Bunting, its most prominent intellectual, and Thibedi, but it was backed by La Guma, who had participated in discussions on the thesis in Moscow, and by Douglas and Molly Wolton. The party only swung behind the policy following its adoption at the Sixth Comintern Congress in August 1928, after which Bunting, who had been delegated to the congress, was required to argue for its adoption. Thibedi, however, remained unconvinced, and was the first to be expelled from the party in the purges that followed. He later established a small Trotskyist grouping.

In a letter quoted by Drew, Bunting told Eddie Roux, the general secretary of the party and a close comrade, 'no black republic in SA could be achieved without overthrowing capitalist rule. And in fact I think "the stage"

part of the formula is verbiage.' Working with this interpretation, Bunting continued to build the party, and in 1929 it reached its zenith, with nearly 3000 members. Drew underscores the contribution which the League of African Rights, formed by Bunting in 1929, made to this process. The Native Republic debate had, however, undermined Bunting's credibility and it had reinforced uncritical allegiance to Moscow. With Stalin arguing that capitalism had entered a 'Third Period' and would soon collapse, the line changed once again. The Woltons used the new position to justify, first, the disbanding of the League, regarded as an example of the 'right-wing danger,' secondly, the removal of Bunting from the leadership, and finally, in 1931, his expulsion.

Others were purged alongside him, and further expulsions, including that of La Guma, soon followed. Party morale collapsed, made worse by the depression and state repression, and membership plummeted. Then, in 1933, after Molly had experienced a breakdown, the Woltons departed for England, leaving the leadership in the hands of Lazer Bach, a young Latvian emigre. Later, as part its concern to build a popular front and to heal divisions within the South African leadership, the Comintern despatched Bach to Moscow, from where he never returned. It was reported that he and the two Richer brothers, who had also been CPSA members, had been sentenced to death. Drew suggests 'their Latvian nationality had marked them as likely victims of the terror.'

Her account of the early and later history of the CPSA is of somewhat less interest. Partly this is because she has had fewer new sources to work with (though there are some), but partly it is because she has uncritically endorsed an antiquated model of South Africa's labour history. Rather than build on the nuanced understanding that has emerged through the work of Jon Lewis, Iris Berger, Elaine Katz, Jeremy Krikler, and others, she assumes workers were rigidly divided along racial line, with 'white labour . . . [deriving] economic, political and social benefits from the super-exploitation of black people'. Thus, she regards it as a 'seeming contradiction' that, during World War Two, whilst the party 'directed itself to the white electorate', it 'regained some influence in the black trade union movement.' And, elsewhere, she says that this influence was 'despite' efforts to recruit white workers.

In reality, although there were racial divisions within the working class, especially in manufacturing there were also common interests, and these were reflected in multiracial strikes and even black membership of registered unions. During the war, when there was widespread unrest, the CPSA's primary focus on industrial workers enabled it to recruit black, Indian, coloured and even white workers. If there was a 'despite', it was 'despite' the party's support for the war effort and consequent avoidance of strikes; but it was 'avoidance', and sometimes 'discouragement', rather than, as Drew puts it, 'suppress[ion of] popular militancy'.

In her description of the 1922 strike, Drew states bluntly: 'The slogan, "Workers of the World Unite for a White S.A.", which appeared on a banner evidently held up by white workers and their wives, was most emphatically not a CPSA slogan nor is there any evidence that Communists supported it.' It is not clear, however, what her confidence is based upon. As I recall, some ten years ago, when researching the Simons Papers, then housed in Uppsala, I came across a party leaflet that did include the famous slogan. It might be more useful to deconstruct, as Baruch Hirson did, the meaning attached to 'White S.A.'[2]

Drew's book takes us a step nearer a definitive history of the CPSA. Such an account would, however, require additional components, including, in particular, a wider range of primary sources. So far, very little use has been made of South Africa's State Archives in writing the party's history, and there are also useful documents in the UK Public Record Office. Systematic use of party publications, and newspapers such as the *Guardian*, would also help. Then there is a growing literature by CPSA insiders, among which Rusty Bernstein's autobiography is especially fine (and it includes an account of the party's dissolution, missing from Drew's volume).[3] Also, there are a number of good interviews with activists that are available as transcripts or tapes, and there are still party members alive who could provide valuable insights.

In addition, critical engagement with relevant secondary sources, including comparative literature, would provide much-needed context, allowing the historian to make judgements about the success or failure of the party at various junctures. Johanningsmeier's article, which, through comparison with the US Communist Party, presents the early CPSA is a positive light, provides an indication of what is possible. Moreover, it helps to have an up-to-date knowledge of the literature (Drew includes no books, and only one article, published after 1997). Notwithstanding its limitations, this book makes a significant contribution to our knowledge of the South African left.

Notes:

[1]. Ed Johanningsmeier, 'Communists and Black Freedom Movements in South Africa and the United States, 1919-50,' in Rick Halpern and Peter Alexander (eds), *Race and Labo[u]r in the United States and South Africa* (forthcoming).

[2]. Baruch Hirson, 'The General Strike of 1922,' *Searchlight South Africa*, 3:3 (1994).

[3]. Rusty Bernstein, *Memory Against Forgetting* (Viking, London 1999).

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