Fifty years since the Sharpeville Massacre: The nature of post-Apartheid South Africa

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This month marks the 50th anniversary of the Sharpeville Massacre, in which the police gunned down 69 people during a peaceful protest in South Africa. The incident escalated the opposition to Apartheid, which maintained rigid racial segregation and disenfranchised the non-white majority, bringing international focus onto the Pretoria regime.

The protests in Sharpeville on March 21, 1960 were organized by the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), which pre-empted plans announced by the African National Congress (ANC) for a series of protests against the pass laws starting March 31. The PAC had split from the ANC the previous year and was considered more hard-line and radical. It called the campaign to protest against low wages and poor living conditions in the townships.

Around 20,000 peaceful protesters converged on Sharpeville, a township about 30 miles south of Johannesburg where black people had been forcibly relocated. In a mass protest many burnt their pass-books in front of the police station and challenged the police to arrest them for being without them. The pass-books were effectively internal passports, which non-whites were obliged to carry at all times. They identified people by race and colour, and determined where they were able to live, work and travel.

The crowd was in high spirits and jubilant when, without warning, the police opened fire indiscriminately at the crowd. Over 200 people were injured and 69 people died, with many shot in the back while running away.

Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd declared a state of emergency, claiming that the protesters had "shot first". No guns were found on any of the protesters, or victims. Thousands of people were arrested, and the ANC and the PAC were banned, with much of their leadership leaving the country.

The ANC subsequently formed a military wing known as "Umkhonto we Sizwe" or "Spear of the Nation", and took to acts of sabotage against government targets, which sometimes killed civilians. These were denounced by South Africa's main backers, Britain and the United States and the ANC was labelled as a "terrorist organisation". However, many foreign investors pulled out of the country and a number of sporting boycotts followed.

The incident and its repercussions led to the growing politicisation of the South African working class and created a more militant younger generation in the townships. The struggle in the townships grew steadily, with a major uprising in Soweto, Johannesburg in1976. By 1985, the regime had lost control of these working class districts and declared a state of emergency. The country was on the brink of civil war. Elements in the regime and leading businessmen opened talks with the ANC, recognising that it was the only organisation that could quell a revolutionary upsurge.

President F. W. de Klerk released the ANC's Nelson Mandela from prison on February 2, 1990, heralding the end of the Apartheid system. White minority rule finally collapsed in 1994 in elections that brought the ANC and Mandela to power. Had he not released Mandela when he did, de Klerk said, "The prospects for a satisfactory negotiated settlement would have diminished with each successive cycle of revolution and repression".

Two years after becoming president, Mandela chose Sharpeville as the scene in which to sign the country's new Constitution.

Half a century after Sharpeville, and two decades since Apartheid was abandoned, little has changed in the economic and social conditions for the vast

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majority of South Africans. A narrow layer of black businessman and politicians gathered around the ruling ANC have, meanwhile, become exceptionally wealthy.

In many ways, Sharpeville itself is not markedly different from the township in 1960. It remains marginalised, unemployment is still rife, the roads are still potholed and rubbish adorns the wasteland. Even the stadium where Mandela signed the Constitution is run down.

Last month in Sharpeville people took to the streets in protest at poor services and poor living conditions. Three buildings were set alight, cars and tyres were torched, and residents clashed with police, who again responded with gunfire.

South Africa's deputy President Kgalema Motlanthe cynically contrasted the violence of current protests with the peaceful protesters in 1960s Sharpeville. "The people of … Sharpeville in 1960 did not voice protest by burning libraries and looting public facilities," said Motlanthe. "On the contrary, they left their passes at home and marched peacefully to the police stations to hand themselves over for arrest."

Hofni Mosesi, from the Concerned Residents of Sharpeville said, "It blurs the difference between the Apartheid government and our government. We feel bitter about it if it happens today, if it's done by the government we voted into power." He added, "This township is just good as far as 21 March is concerned; otherwise, nothing else, forget about it."

South Africa remains one of the most unequal societies in the world, with some 70 percent of the population living below the official poverty line—more than in 1990. The limited political gains that were made have not translated into greater social and economic equality. Rather, the gap between rich and poor has widened.

The ANC headed the drive to open up the South African economy to the global market, and its neo-liberal economic perspective and free market policies have led to the loss of millions of jobs. Unemployment stands at about 40 percent of the workforce, according to any realistic estimate. The richest members of society have increased their annual earnings by as much as 50 percent.

The social conditions in South Africa today testify to the complete inability of the bourgeoisie, white or black, to resolve the democratic questions that faced the country in 1990 and which still exist today. The franchise is now universal, but this offers little more than a formal show of democracy. Real political power is concentrated in the hands of the elite, now including leading members of the ANC. That layer acts as the local representative of a global oligarchy and the major banks and corporations, utilising its power to safeguard these interests against the threat from below.

Every national movement has followed the same trajectory, in making their peace with world imperialism and its political representatives. Across Africa the Middle East and Latin America the picture is the same: nationalist leaders are now acting as the local point men of oil companies, mining conglomerates and banks.

The 50 years since Sharpeville and the 20 since Mandela's release demonstrate, above all, the need for a genuine socialist movement in South Africa that advances an internationalist programme for the working class and rural poor, rejecting all appeals for unity with the bourgeoisie in the national interest. The interests of workers and the rural poor are not compatible with the preservation of the profit system.

The working class must build its own independent political movement, committed to overthrowing capitalism and establishing genuine social equality based on planned production for need not profit. It must take its starting point from Trotsky's theory of Permanent Revolution. This recognises that in the imperialist epoch, the democratic tasks facing countries like South Africa can only be resolved in the course of a socialist revolution—one that will ultimately be successful only on the world arena and which requires a united political movement with the working class in the advanced imperialist centres.

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