

Newspapers in the March to Freedom—2

"IMVO"—THE FIRST AFRICAN POLITICAL PAPER

THE first independent political newspaper, expressing African opinion and at times the voice of the small African professional elite, was "Imvo Zabantsundu—The voice of the People." Its first issue appeared on November 3, 1884, from its offices established in Kingwilliamstown.

Africans Vote

Africans in those days possessed the vote, and had, for the first time that year, begun to participate as an organised force in the Cape elections. They did so by throwing their weight behind a white liberal, James Rose Innes, in the Kingwilliamstown constituency where they were strongest.

The support of the Native Electoral Association, led by John Tengo Jabavu, at the time editor of *Isigidimi* (see last week's chapter), brought Rose Innes victory.

In order to retain their influence, a group of white liberals, including Rose Innes' brother, decided to provide the capital for the establishment of the first African political newspaper. Jabavu was appointed editor, but the liberals kept full control of policy.

Isolate Elite

The controllers of the paper were more concerned with using Imvo to isolate the intellectuals from the masses, to maintain white domination and clamp down on militant struggle than to promote the true interests of the Africans.

This is revealed clearly in the statement of policy published in the first issue and welcomed by the white newspapers all over Southern Africa. It declares:

"A large class has been formed among the Natives which has learnt to loathe the institutions of barbarism, and to press for the better institutions of a civilised life. The aim of Imvo is to be a rope to tow these stragglers to the shore of civilisation.

"Native public opinion does not tie itself to any party but endeavours to promote loyalty to the Queen and to the British Empire, and peace and prosperity in South Africa."

Attack On African Vote

In spite of this white control, however, Imvo in its early years was an important factor in the political advancement of the Africans.

During the first attack on the African franchise in 1887 the paper gave great publicity to the wave of protest meetings amongst Africans, and Jabavu himself was the convener of a conference of delegates from all over the Cape called to discuss the impending disfranchisement.

Although the fight against the disfranchisement was completely unsuccessful the seeds of united action were sown.

Later, as the white Liberals and the reactionaries moved closer together on more and more issues in their common determination to keep the Africans in subjection, which finally culminated in Union in 1910, Imvo's policy of moderation and muted protest on some issues was unacceptable to the ordinary people. Yet there were many occasions when Imvo's criticisms were strongly voiced and

it held fast to the assertion of African rights.

Land Act

Such protest was particularly marked with the passing of the "Squatter's Bill" or what we subsequently know as the Land Act, which deprived Africans of the right to farm or live on the land of a white owner. The Bill was presented during a particularly severe drought and thousands of

from society and doomed to a condition worse than slavery." Imvo shuddered at Dr. Abdurahman's drastic words:

"The Coloured races are rapidly beginning to see the necessity for Union. The amount of irritation produced in the mind of the Native of late is surprising and there is a deep-seated feeling of passive hatred being engendered against the white races. A pause must be made in this anti-colour policy or ere long that passive hatred will show itself in active resistance."

Imvo commented: "We trust the picture described is imaginary, but even if it were true it is for a Coloured leader like Dr. Abdurahman to set a better example . . . It is in moderation and calm reason that our problems can be solved, not by extreme men on either side."

Though Imvo sought to avoid too open a clash with the government at most times, its pages carried a most vivid reflection of the pain and indignation felt by the Africans throughout the country at the time of the white miners' strike in Johannesburg.

The strike had been called when the Chamber of Mines made known its intention of employing Africans in certain semi-skilled jobs in the mines. The furious white miners regarded this as a threat to their own jobs and demanded what we now know as "job reservation." They said that in order to pay Africans cheaper wages the government (synonymous with the Chamber of Mines) was prepared to sacrifice "white South Africa."

During March of 1922, Commandos were set up to fight Smuts and the Chamber of Mines, and as a subsidiary occupation they set about shooting innocent Africans in various areas.

In an editorial of February 28,

From the Notebooks
of
LIONEL FORMAN,
with additions by
SADIE FORMAN

Africans were left hungry and destitute as a result.

On January 23, 1912, the editorial commented:

"The Squatter's Bill assumes every Non-European to be a squatter on the land of his birth and a thing to be hunted and harried off the soil. In this country, when the Europeans came, they found the Natives settled and cultivating the land. To assume they are squatters . . . is to resort to the most barefaced measures of oppression ever heard of."

In subsequent months Imvo carried full reports on the Cape Peninsula Native Association which was formed to fight the Squatter's Bill, and the speeches made at its meetings were extensively quoted.

Formation Of A.N.C.

It is of particular interest that during March of 1912 the newly formed ANC known as the S.A. Native National Congress and the African Political Organisation, led by Dr. Abdurahman, agreed on the need for closer co-operation between "the Coloured and Native races" and met to protest at the Squatter's Bill. Imvo reported an APO member, B. Abrahams, as saying that the Bill "shamelessly sought to benefit the large gold mining companies and the big landowners. The government really played into the hands of the capitalists in Europe who held gold mine shares or owned vast tracts of undeveloped country—men who had never even seen South Africa . . ."

The ANC was formed in 1912 as a reaction to the sterner measures of suppression envisaged by the whites and represented by the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910.

1912 was also a year of intense political activity on the part of the APO whose militant policy frightened Imvo Zabantsundu at times.

Dr. Abdurahman

Imvo reported a speech made in Johannesburg, "the very lion's jaws of colour hatred and prejudice," by Dr. Abdurahman which had been violently criticised by the white press as being "dangerous incitement." The paper said that he had made an able and thoughtful address on colour problems, but it was a matter of regret that he could not curb his feelings. He spoke of the Coloured man being regarded "as a pariah, banned

1922, headed the "Industrial Crisis," Imvo commented trenchantly:

"Whatever may be the object of the strikers in plunging the whole country into a sea of turbulent waters, or from a desire to re-foster that detrimental political and industrial line of demarcation—the colour bar, there is no parallel in S.A. history.

"Why the present trouble on the Colour Bar?"

"Politicians fear the progress and development of the Native. Labour wants all the white workers to stand and watch the Natives work, in fact they want the Natives to do all the work and the white people to draw the money.

"The colour bar gives the white man an opportunity of getting paid for not working but for watching the black man work."

A mouthpiece of the Chamber of Mines and an upholder of capitalism, Imvo commented:

"Capitalism has got sick and tired of paying the white people large sums of money for doing nothing and now wants black labour for the sake of cheapness."

And it was also bold enough to say:

"These opposing parties on one thing are agreed—that they have one common enemy—the Native—who must be kept in his place and not be allowed to make progress."

"Thousands of Natives have no land, they are entirely dependent on the mines for a livelihood and hundreds and thousands of their dependants are starving today."

On March 21 the paper published a strongly condemnatory letter from the Chief Organiser of the Cape Native Congress, Dr. James D. Ngojo, against the actions of the Commandos in shooting down "inoffensive, innocent" Africans whose "crime" was that they lived. Imvo added:

Political Plot

"This is not a strike pure and simple, but a political intrigue

aimed at keeping the black man down through the false war-cry of a White South Africa, uttered by incompetent Europeans who wish artificially to entrench their empty position of unmerited superiority by legislation.

"A befitting conclusion to the Reign of Terror will be the double-fold one of (a) the destruction of the colour bar both in parliament and in industries and (b) the outright suppression of the Republican propaganda."

Precisely the contrary of both these "befitting conclusions" resulted from the strike. The colour bar was firmly entrenched in industry throughout the country and far from Republican propaganda being suppressed, the Smuts government was defeated in 1924 and a Labour-Nationalist Pact Government was elected which commenced with a will to propagate Afrikaner nationalism and to make South Africa "safe for the white man."

African Culture

In those earlier years Imvo provided a window for African creative writing as well. Aside from letters and articles by such men as Dube, Plaatje, Elijah Makiwane and Tseme, it also published for example, the poetry of S. E. Rune Mqayi, the great Xhosa writer of praise poems to the African prophets. A beautifully expressed song on the misguided prophetess Nongqause who exhorted her people to burn their cattle and crops as a protest against the Glen Gray Land Act, the forerunner of the Reserve system, and to wait for a new life of plenty to come as a result, is published in full in the issue of January 12, 1912.

Bought Out

In later years Imvo Zabantsundu was bought out by a white company, the Bantu Press, and could then lay no claim to being "The Voice of the People." Far less can it do so now that it has been taken over by Verwoerd's Afrikaanse Pers.

Nevertheless prior to this latest take-over, its 78 years of life give it a place among the country's oldest papers and the high quality both of the journalism and the technical production from the very first issue are pioneering efforts of which African journalism can well be proud.

(Next week: The A.P.O., the Cape Socialist, Abantu-Batho.)

Basuto Workers Back Call For Liberation Front

Provisional Secretariat Formed

MASERU.
SUPPORT for the formation of a national liberation front in Basutoland continues to grow amongst all sections of the people.

The call was first issued by Josiel Lefela, veteran leader of Lekhotla la Bafo (see New Age September 27). This was followed by the independent decision of the Basutoland African Students' Association to call for a united front (New Age October 11).

Now formal support for Lefela's call has been pledged by the Basutoland General Workers' Union, which met at Mhaleshoek recently, and a secretariat has already been formed headed by Mr. A. S. Makhele, Secretary-General of the Basutoland Congress of Trade Unions.

MINIMUM PROGRAMME

The resolution of the Basutoland General Workers' Union says a national minimum programme of action should include the de-

mand for:

(1) Complete and immediate independence and the establishment of a democratic Lesotho in which the civil rights and liberties of every individual are guaranteed with Moshoeshe II as Head of State.

(2) Unity of all parties, chiefs, personalities, trade unions, peasant organisations, youth, women's and students' movements irrespective of ideology or political belief who are prepared to work wholeheartedly for (i) above.

(3) Maximum and efficient organisation of the masses at village, area, district and national level in order that the whole nation may participate fully in nation-building and freedom tasks.

(4) Development of close co-operation with organisations in Africa and the world which support the immediate independence of Lesotho and in particular freedom movements in Bechuanaland, Swaziland and South Africa and in the PAFMECA area.

(5) An immediate and planned

programme to prepare the country for radical agrarian reform, economic development and administration of Lesotho, by the Basotho and for the Basotho.

(6) The development of a National, democratic, collective leadership of talents to organise the freedom struggle in a planned manner.

FRONT COMMITTEES

The General Workers' Union suggests that wherever possible National Liberation Front committees should be formed all over Lesotho representing the broadest unity of all people prepared to subscribe to this declaration.

Village, local and district conferences should be organised at which this declaration can be discussed and at which action can be decided upon.

"Preparations should be started to organise a National People's Conference whose main objective would be to determine the best means of uniting all Basotho in a patriotic and unselfish struggle for freedom and independence."

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