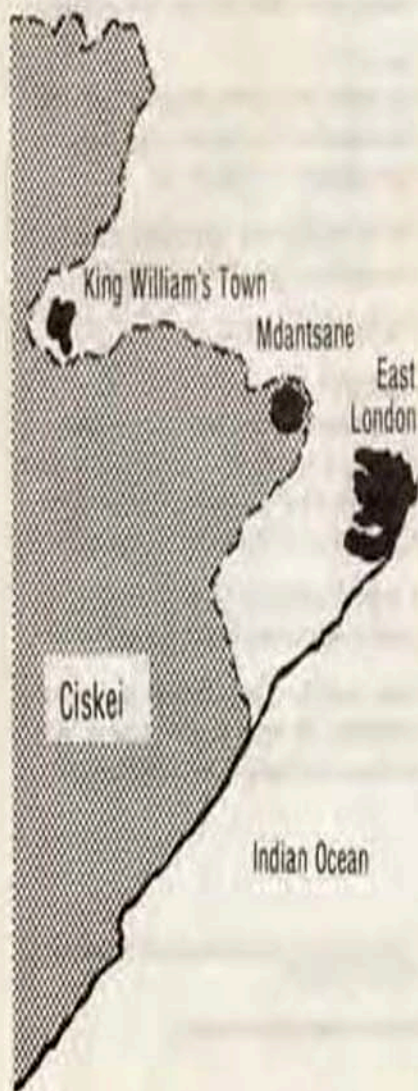


Mdantsane — *township in crisis*



What is Mdantsane?

Mdantsane is the huge dormitory township, situated in the Ciskei about 20 km from East London. An account of Mdantsane's early history has still to be written. Equally important is its current history, especially of the period since the early 1960s when residents of African townships in East London were first relocated there. Added to the old residents of East London were numerous blacks from other parts of white South Africa and the Ciskei.

Mdantsane has a population of about 500 000. This makes it the second largest black township in South Africa. Only Soweto is bigger. Unlike the case of Soweto, Mdantsane has, in terms of South Africa's policy of urban relocation been sited in a homeland, next to an industrial area. It replaced a number of black townships around the city. East London is the fifth largest industrial centre in South Africa.

The first houses at Mdantsane were built in 1963. The removals of people from East London started in 1964 while the official proclamation of Mdantsane as a homeland town was effected on April 7, 1966.

Employment

Although it is the 5th largest industrial centre in South Africa, East London has remained relatively small in terms of its contribution to the gross national product. Despite its smallness it has, due to the crumbling of the peasant economies in the Eastern Cape, attracted many blacks from its hinterland. At various times blacks from all over the Eastern and Southern Cape migrated to East London in the hope of finding employment. Their aspirations were not always realised. The worst came with the present recession. Unemployment in Mdantsane climbed to as high as forty percent of the work force.

In May 1979 the South African Members of Parliament in the area warned of escalating unemployment. "Blacks in the Ciskei are jobless and hungry." "Although East London was close to Mdantsane concessions to industrialists there were not sufficiently attractive to promote expansion." "Create an export process zone in the East London area." "The Government is making a grave mistake by shipping people to the Ciskei... when there is no land or jobs for them." "An additional 300 000 people have been moved to the Ciskei but where are workers in these areas going to be employed?"

The Eastern Cape Trade Union movement

As with the rest of the black trade union movement in South Africa, the movement in East London developed in waves. The early dramatic periods were in the 1920's, the 40's and 60's. The earlier phases are generally seen as being defensive.

The present so-called offensive phase of organised black labour forces dates back to 1973 with the Durban strikes, in the wake of which the government enacted legislation that led to the formation of Works and Liaison Committees. When Wiehahn led a Commission to evaluate the existing labour market legislation in 1977, the commission dealt in the first part of its report with the question of trade union rights. The report was followed by the new Industrial Conciliation Act in 1979. The Act stipulated that all trade unions had to be registered. It also said that migrant workers and foreign workers were to be excluded from the system. This appears to have been the most problematic area for workers in the Eastern Cape and Natal where, through relocation of urban settlements or the redrawing of homeland boundaries, places such as Mdantsane and Kwa-Mashu were excluded from South Africa.

In East London the following trade unions are active: SAAWU, CUSA, GWU and AFCWU. SAAWU members have been particularly harshly dealt with, having been harassed, fired upon and detained. As a whole workers in Mdantsane or the Ciskei are in an extremely vulnerable position. They work in South Africa where their trade union rights are not recognised and they live in the Ciskei where General Charles Sete is on record as saying, "workers in the Ciskei have no need for trade unions as they have an adequate protector in the Ciskei government."

Unions in the Ciskei are not only effectively banned, but are seen as a threat to state security. In addition workers in the East London industrial complex earn low wages, endure long working hours and have to travel to work by very expensive and inefficient means. No unions operating in East London are allowed to open offices in Mdantsane. SAAWU for instance operates on the strategy of organizing workers at the plants and thereafter opening negotiations for recognition with the management once 60-80% unionization is achieved. They reject registration and espouse the view that the trade union movement is an integral part of the black

community struggle. In collaboration with the South African government the Ciskeian authorities have done everything possible to stamp out unionism in the Ciskei. In 1980 twelve officials were detained without charge or trial. 1981 saw 205 union members arrested.

Thozamile Gqweta, president of SAAWU and his vice-president Sisa Njikelane, have been detained several times. They have also been harassed, tortured, abused and threatened.

All this is done by the Ciskeian government with a view to developing a disciplined, docile and efficient labour force which will help to rebuild the image of Ciskeian labour.

Transport and bus boycott

Right from its establishment the people of Mdantsane complained of the high transport costs. Mdantsane is not only 20 km away from East London but the buses are irregular and they do not enter the township. Their routes are only designed to serve the employers in East London. Most commuters spend 2 to 3 hours to and from work on the road each day.

The need to have transport costs reduced has always been a major one to the residents of Mdantsane.

The boycott

July 13

The Weigemoed Commission of Inquiry into bus transportation reported in the press to have recommended general fare increases and a ban on the use of minibus taxis. A press warning of the political tensions that might develop in the wake of the implementation of the proposed new black transport policy.

July 19

Bus boycott against the Ciskei Transport Corporation (CTC) begins.

July 21

A petrol bomb explosion on a Mdantsane bus kills 2 children and 25 people are injured. Police roadblocks along the East London/Mdantsane route are set up. Sisa Njikelane, vice-president of SAAWU, is detained. Queues of cars at road blocks grow even longer.

July 22

SAAWU claims that the police sjambokked passengers.

July 25

Ciskei police open fire on a crowd at Fort Jackson station. Five people are reported wounded.

August 1

Three Transport and Allied Workers Union men are detained by the Ciskei Minister of Justice, Mr S M Takane. He also announced that people encouraging the bus boycott face 10 years in jail. Vigilantes come out on the streets to try and break the bus boycott.

August 3

Ciskei police do not interfere as vigilantes attack people with sabres and knokpories as well as being pulled from registered taxis and beaten. Over 150 cars are reported confiscated for illegally transporting passengers.

August 4

State of Emergency declared by Takane with curfew between 10pm and 4.30am. At Fort Jackson police open fire between 4.30 and 5am, killing 5 people and injuring 22 others. Witnesses say that police guarded the railway line and forced people onto the buses when they tried to catch the trains. Trains are nearly empty while road blocks are reported all over Mdantsane. The number of wounded rises to forty five.

Students at an Mdantsane School boycott classes in support of their parents. East London employers commend railway police for averting serious disruption by keeping Ciskei police off railway property and allowing commuters onto the trains. Some factories report fifty percent absenteeism.

SAAWU president, Thozamile Gqweta, claims Ciskei police are using the boycott to crack down on the unions.

Ciskei Supreme Court hears affidavits of police brutality and extreme violations of human rights.

August 9

At least 350 people are reported detained. Two hundred people arrested for curfew breaking appear in court and have their cases postponed for two weeks. Bail of R400 each is granted.

August 10

George Orsmond, President of the East London Chamber of Commerce, is reported as saying that Mdantsane workers could now face wage cuts.

Unrest spreads to schools as hundreds of children boycott classes in support of their parents. Seventy students are believed to be held under security laws.

August 11

Two schools and homes of several CNIP members are burnt down.

August 12

CUSA claims two of their unionists are detained. Pk Botha, the South African Foreign Minister, appeals for calm in the Ciskei. No interference unless asked.

August 15

Pk Botha visits the Ciskei.

August 17

President Lennox Sebe announces that the Ciskei Transport Corporation which is fifty percent government-owned will cut its fare increase by half. Sebe is now living in a luxury East London hotel. SAAWU reports detention of four more unionists.

August 19

Mdantsane sends a strong delegation to the United Democratic Front Conference in Cape Town. They are harassed by the CGIS en route.

The international labour organisations protest against the detention of trade unionists in the Ciskei.

The bus boycott continues.

September 9

The bus boycott is in its 9th week. Gomo Bus Company, a subsidiary of CTC reported to be about to retrench 330 employees after selling 74 of their buses because of losses suffered in the bus boycott.

It is reliably understood that the CTC has lost R2 million in revenue and damage to buses.

Buses continue to carry 40% of the usual number of passengers. The rest of the workers use the trains and have vowed never to use the buses again.

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