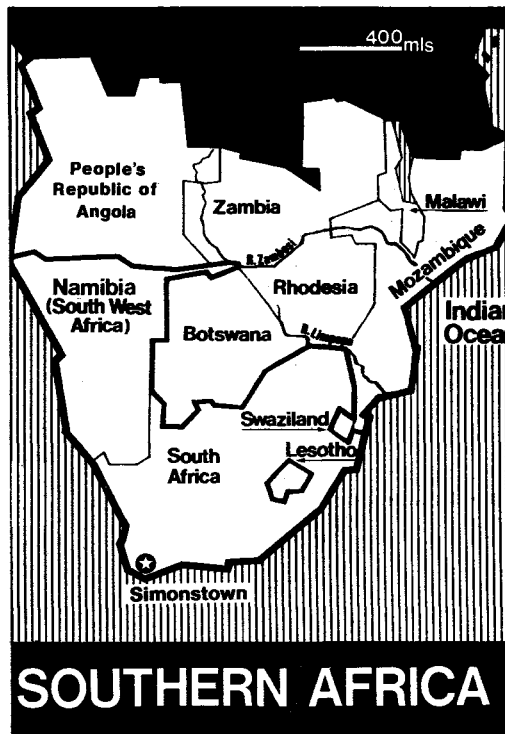


# THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES

After Angola: Namibia! by Mike Mercer, LSM Bay Area Unit

*The struggle of the Angolan people under the leadership of MPLA against neo-colonialism and foreign intervention recently captured the attention of the entire world. The consequences of this successful war of national liberation are serious indeed for global imperialist interests, particularly the remaining racist regimes of southern Africa. The establishment of Peoples' Republics in Mozambique and Angola has significantly altered the balance of forces throughout the entire region. FRELIMO and MPLA are not only taking decisive steps toward the elimination of imperialist exploitation within their own countries, they are also providing solid support for the national liberation movements of Namibia, Zimbabwe and South Africa. Thus, anti-imperialists can expect southern Africa to become an increasingly important focal point in the international struggle against imperialism. Unfortunately however, little is known of the liberation movements which are leading this next stage of the armed struggle in Africa, just as MPLA was virtually unheard of before the "2nd War of National Liberation." With this in mind we offer the following brief description of Namibia's liberation struggle led by SWAPO (South West Africa People's Organization).*



Roughly twice the size of California, Namibia has a semi-desert terrain which belies its incredible natural wealth. With a little over a million inhabitants, Namibia's per capita gross domestic product is the second largest in Africa. The Namibian people, however, are among the most emiserated in Africa. This contradiction lies in the system of apartheid, which is at the heart of the South West African economy. Blacks, constituting 85% of the population, are confined by law to the 40% of the land which makes up the reserves. These Bantustans are carved out along tribal lines, thus separating the Ovambos, Hereros, Namas, etc. They exist primarily in northern Namibia where the climate is arid and the land is mostly infertile. Inside the white "Police Zone," where no black man may venture without a pass, cultivable land, offshore fishing and most of all vast mineral deposits are exploited by white settlers, South Africa and multinational corporations.

But Namibians are not only excluded from this great natural wealth; it is their labor which realizes it. Because subsistence in the reserves is impossible, black men are forced to work as contract laborers in the mines, in the canneries and on the white farms.

Their wages amount to a few dollars per month; for the multinationals this means profit rates upwards of 25%. The intense contradiction, as much as the intense poverty, produced by this system of neo-slavery necessarily gave rise to an organization such as SWAPO, and furthermore explains SWAPO's broad base of support among the Namibian people.

The origins of the present situation go back to 1920 when the League of Nations, upon the demise of German colonial rule, granted South Africa a mandate to govern Namibia: "to promote to the utmost the material and moral well-being and the social progress of the inhabitants of the Territory." South Africa duly proceeded to ignore the high-sounding terms of this "sacred trust" and develop the country according to the interests of the Whites. The new South West African administration completed the "pacification" of the natives, only begun by the Germans, by methodically alienating land for white settlement and pushing Blacks onto the reserves. The League of Nations managed to look the other way, and while the UN terminated the mandate and subsequently passed resolutions condemning South African occupation, it has been impotent as far as enforcement of the measures is concerned.\*

With World War II came an increased need of the industrialized nations for raw materials; thus, with an influx of foreign investment, the South West African economy shifted its focus from settler agriculture to mining and other extractive industry. In 1947 the long-dormant Tsumeb mine was reopened by American Metal Climax (AMAX) and Newmont Mining Co., two American corporations, and several South African firms. The corporations have, since that time, extracted over one billion dollars in lead, copper, zinc and other minerals. With this increase in industry, the need for cheap labor also increased. It was no longer a matter of acquiring a farmhand, herder or other "boy"; contract workers in large supply were necessary for the "development" of the economy, i.e. for the enrichment of the privileged white minority.

Possibly the best account of the contract labor system is that told by a Namibian who has been through it; *Breaking Contract: the Story of Vinnia Ndadi*<sup>1</sup> is a revealing document. Vinnia describes the conditions under which he grew up in the Ovambo reserve: subsistence farming with primitive tools, walking seven miles every day for water, frequent sickness and no hospitals, and 90% illiteracy. "At school I couldn't concentrate on my lessons very well - mostly because I was always hungry and tired." Unable to finance further education and often having to support families, men frequently go on contract at an early age. Vinnia tells of being shipped with hundreds of others in cattle cars and given no food and of spending nights in a laborers' compound under a thin, lice-infested blanket; finally he reaches his workplace, a large white farm: "After three years at the Jooste farm I was weak and tired. Three years of nothing but maize-meal porridge, a little salt, and occasional meat when a diseased sheep died . . . . We seldom had breakfast and were so exhausted from the work we just slept like dead men . . . . I left Jooste's farm with less than [five dollars] . . . after three whole years!"

In simple terms of wages, a high rate of exploitation is evident. Vinnia later made roughly four dollars a month as a servant. In mining, the highest-paying sector, average pay in 1971 was reported to be about \$30 a month. It is difficult to relate this to the American minimum wage of over two dollars *an hour*, but possibly more foreign is the idea of absolutely no working rights. Namibians, once contracted, have no say over where they will work, for how much, under what conditions, for how long, etc. Breaking contract is illegal, as are strikes. In this sense the contract labor system is a form of slavery. But inasmuch as slavery presupposes reasonable upkeep of the slave, conditions in Namibia are worse than slavery for the worker. The vast reserve labor force means that every contract worker is expendable, as Vinnia soon discovered: "White farmers could get away with anything . . . treat their workers just as they pleased. Many times we heard about men being shot dead by their *Baas* just for talking back. The law did nothing, of course -

\*The UN recognizes SWAPO as the "sole legitimate representative of the Namibian people," and has ruled both South African administration and expatriation of Namibian resources by anyone illegal.



People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN) guerrillas. SWAPO PHOTO

it was made for the Whites.

Conditions such as these obviously leave Namibians with little to lose and few options for dealing with their situation. Some, such as Vinnia, "break contract" and run away, but soon find themselves confronted with the repressive state apparatus, to be beaten, interrogated and often imprisoned indefinitely. Thus when the Ovamboland People's Congress, a forerunner of SWAPO, was founded in 1957 to deal directly with the contradictions of the contract labor system, many Namibians responded. Although limited to the contract system and based among the Ovambo people (who make up the bulk of the contract laborers), the OPC (later the Ovamboland People's Organization) was successful in organizing strikes, rallies and other forms of popular resistance. The OPO soon found, however, that it would be necessary to do more than abolish the contract labor system; all forms of oppression had to be destroyed, and this effort would have to unite all Namibians if it was to succeed. In 1959 SWAPO was formed, as a national organization cutting across tribal divisions, with national aims and objectives. This development was largely a result of the system itself; contract workers, usually spending no more than 18 months at any one job and working at various locations, get a sense of the whole country and meet Namibians of various ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Early actions were of an

open, above-ground variety: rallies, open protests, petitions to the UN. The South West African police answered a peaceful protest in December 1959 by shooting down unarmed civilians, while the UN could offer only verbal support for SWAPO. Militant Andreas Shipanga tells how SWAPO learned from this experience:

Representatives of our people had gone to New York to petition the UN and we continued clinging to the illusion that the United Nations could really do something to get South Africa out of Namibia. But now we looked back on that day in December when our people were shot down in cold blood and saw what the UN did with the information and petitions it got from SWAPO . . . the action it took. We came to full agreement: it was nothing but fine-sounding resolutions piling up in the UN archives. This recognition led us to the decision at the Congress of 1961 to prepare for the eventual armed struggle in Namibia. Soon we began recruiting volunteers for training in guerrilla warfare . . . .<sup>2</sup>

In 1966 SWAPO launched the armed struggle soon after it was banned by the South African regime. Since then it has carried out many small-scale operations - sabotage, ambush, harassment - to incessantly engage and wear down the larger and more powerful enemy. But the success of PLAN (People's Liberation Army of Namibia) over the last decade must be viewed as part of the development of SWAPO as a national organization. SWAPO is first of all a political organization, and the consistent military struggle has done much to show Namibians that the fight is possible as well as necessary. While SWAPO openly leads public protest and mass opposition, some SWAPO cadres operate to organize and conduct political education throughout the country. The 1972 strikes against the contract labor system, which all but shut down the country for six months, are an indication of the militancy of Namibians inside the Police Zone. SWAPO also fights on a diplomatic front, seeking and gaining recognition and support from the UN and among many progressive countries. While they have no illusions about the efficacy of diplomacy, according to SWAPO UN representative Ben Gurirab, they are trying to bring all possible forces to bear upon South Africa.

The combined impact of SWAPO's many-sided struggle for national liberation is for South Africa a force to be reckoned with. The possibility of Angola serving as a base area for increased guerrilla fighting only heightens Pretoria's apprehension and reaction.

South Africa's strategy for dealing with the Namibian situation is one of detente, of attempting to mollify the critics of colonialism and apartheid while at the same time making no substantive changes. Generally, Prime Minister Vorster has applied this strategy to all of southern Africa and not without success. While South African schemes to create an orbit of client states have been dampened by the tide of black liberation, Vorster is trying to minimize losses and adapt gracefully by initiating "dialog" with African leaders. Recognizing in Namibia that colonialism is in its last days, the Prime Minister is attempting to make a smooth transition to neocolonialism and thus to continue to exploit Namibians through indirect (i.e. puppet) administration. Conceding the "territorial sovereignty" of Namibia, Vorster in early September of last year began "constitutional talks" with Namibian Whites and tribal chiefs. Here the age-old policy of "divide and rule" came into play: while South Africa entertained Bantustan leaders, SWAPO was excluded from the talks. These talks gained little credibility with Namibians, as SWAPO representative Ben Gurirab explained: "The so-called constitutional talks have created an atmosphere in which the overwhelming majority of the people of Namibia are looking at those who are supporting these talks as traitors."<sup>3</sup>

While this move toward "independence" was designed to alleviate pressure both from within and without, it has so far fooled very few. Still, key figures have been swept up in detente's deceptive air of reform, and for SWAPO the strategy presents a marked danger. Zambian President Kenneth Kaunda, who has housed SWAPO guerrillas inside his country, has picked up the drumbeat of detente and encouraged SWAPO to stop the fighting and negotiate with South Africa to elicit peaceful concessions. This encouragement has turned to pressure to the point that recently Zambia shut down a SWAPO training base in Lusaka. SWAPO has made it clear, however, that it will fight until Namibia is free. South Africa

will never negotiate itself out of the country; it is far too valuable to let go.

From a purely economic standpoint, Namibia is extremely valuable, both to South Africa and to international imperialism. These two interests are largely intertwined - Namibian operations are jointly owned and moreover South African corporations are children of international capital. If "foreign" investment appears limited to a handful of multinationals, South Africa's administrative expatriation of wealth is the reason why. (After 1967 South Africa no longer published separate figures for Namibia; it was considered a "fifth province.") Actually, the exploitation of Namibia has not yet realized its full potential: because Namibia's future has been a question mark, corporations have yet to make long-range commitments. Several oil companies, including Texaco and Getty, are paying thousands just to prospect but are waiting for political stability before investing. AMAX was recently reported to be *pulling out* of Namibia, probably hoping to re-enter when it is a neocolony.

On the other hand, South African plans to "develop" Namibia are going ahead full steam in an attempt to cement economic control. The Cunene Dam Scheme, upon completion in the mid-1980's, would supply mining industry with hydroelectric power and provide irrigation for white farming. It consists of a series of dams and power stations along the Angolan Cunene River, which approaches and then runs along the northern Namibian border into the Atlantic. When originally contracted with the Portuguese in 1966, the scheme presupposed long-range control over both Namibia and Angola. Despite the fall of Portuguese colonialism, neither South Africa nor the British, German and US corporations have surrendered: construction continues, and South African troops have invaded Angola to allegedly protect dam sites. Adherence to the long-range scheme for increased exploitation of Namibia seems an indication of South Africa's true intentions for the country.

More important perhaps is the strategic aspect of Namibia's value to imperialism. Lying to the north of South Africa, it serves as a buffer zone against guerrilla activity; SWAPO, conversely, represents the ruin of this *cordon sanitaire*. A truly independent Namibia would provide South African ANC (African National Congress) guerrillas with a friendly border, thus accelerating the demise of the South African white-minority regime.



PLAN militant. PHOTO: PER SANDEN, RUDI SPEE

Here the anti-imperialist role of SWAPO becomes particularly clear. The "fall" of South Africa, that is, the rise of black South Africans to non-exploitative majority rule, will be a crushing blow for the western imperialist nations. Western investment in South Africa exceeds eight billion dollars and involves almost every major US multinational. South Africa has three-quarters of the imperialist world's gold and chromium reserves, 40% of the world's manganese, and, combined with Namibia, over a third of the world's uranium as well as a host of other minerals. Hundreds of ships round the Cape daily, and South Africa has the radar equipment to monitor the area from South America to the Indian Ocean. While collaboration with apartheid is a source of embarrassment, the NATO countries cannot afford to do otherwise. With the decline of South Africa, US and NATO intervention in Angola, Namibia and elsewhere in southern Africa can only increase. Henry Kissinger's deceptive calls for Namibian "independence," designed to harmlessly disassociate the US image from South Africa, will likewise be contradicted when the crunch comes.

The anti-imperialist nature of Namibian independence hinges on SWAPO itself: is this an organization which will reorganize the country in favor of Namibians, which will disdain the penetration of foreign capital for the enrichment of a few? Ben Gurirab foresees a future along these lines:

It will be the responsibility of SWAPO when victory comes to establish a society different from the one that we are fighting against at the moment . . . to eliminate exploitation of one person by another . . . to insure that *all* the Namibians, regardless of whatever superficial differentiations, will enjoy the wealth of the country . . . There will be no privileges enjoyed by one group of Namibians as opposed to the majority.<sup>4</sup>

SWAPO's practice reflects this political line. Through the ten years of armed struggle guerrilla fighters have continued to strengthen their ties with the Namibian people. While often willingly supplied by rural communities, SWAPO militants distribute clothing, give medical care, and conduct literacy and political education classes. Racism and tribalism, characteristic of imperialist puppet groups such as the FNLA and UNITA in Angola, are not tolerated by SWAPO: while Whites in Namibia have not given much support, progressive Whites are nonetheless welcomed, and SWAPO members come from all ethnic groups. Women take part at all levels in the organization, and a Women's League educates against traditional attitudes of female subservience. Thus, a new society is being outlined even as the national liberation struggle continues.

The process is long and difficult, but it is certain that SWAPO, bolstered by an MPLA-led Angola, will defeat South African colonialism and subsequently shut the door to neocolonial, imperialist interests. This victory of the Namibian people will be both the harbinger for the liberation of South Africa and one more step toward the eventual liberation of humanity.

1. LSM Press, 1974.

2. *Interview with Andreas Shipanga*, LSM Press, 1973, p.5.

3. Taped interview with Ben Gurirab, Pacifica Radio, 1975.

4. *Ibid.*