



Black women and resistance in South Africa

WORKING WOMEN: A portrait of South Africa's black women workers, text and photographs by Leslie Lawson, edited by Helene Perold. *Raven Press and SACHED Trust, Johannesburg, South Africa, 1985, 144pp. R6.00.*

This remarkable book reveals in a simple, yet profound manner, the breadth and depth of the black working woman's experience under apartheid. Through an effective combination of personal interviews and photographs of women in their working and living situations, the book allows women from all walks of life to tell of their hardships. In it women relate their struggles to survive, as well as their fight for a better life.

The most impressive feature of the book is that the women speak for themselves. In describing the double shift, one woman says: "Let's say it's Monday and I had to go to work. I had to wake up at four o'clock, because I had to wash the nappies I'd been using during the night. . . . Then, make food for the baby, take the baby on my back and drop her with the old lady, come back, take the other child - the clever one - halfway to school. I had to take my child very early to school. School only started at 8.30 a.m. but at 6.30 a.m. my baby was there. I always took her. It was far too dangerous for her to go by herself. I used to catch the train at about 6.20 a.m. to be at work at 7.30 a.m."

Black women speak

The same woman gives a heartbreaking face to the high black child mortality rate by describing how she was forced to leave her baby with an old lady while she went to work:

"It's really tough being a working wife. I was really worried about my babies. That old lady (the child minder) was really old. One old lady and a bunch of six babies! Sometimes she'd give them sour milk. . . . I think that's why my baby died. She had gastro-enteritis. They said she was getting the wrong kind of food. I always blame that work, because I had no time to stay with my kids. That was my last baby."

The book deals in a similar way with the experience of domestic servants, rural farmworkers and subsistence farmers, trade union organisers and the self-employed such as hawkers and prostitutes. It also describes the problems women encounter with the influx control system. One woman from the Transkei describes her reaction to being in prison after her arrest for being found illegally in the urban areas:

"You just sit in prison. . . . Sometimes it can happen that some (other prisoners) try to give you trouble, but if you are lucky, maybe you'll find nice people to sit with. Then we look after each other and talk. I was very scared when I first went there. And later. Most of my friends have also been in prison."

Seeing is believing

Aside from producing lines which should become classics in South African folklore, such as the cleaner saying of the toilet she has to clean "You could put your bed and wardrobe there and make it a room," the book contains compelling photographs which tell a story all on their own. Superb pictures of women in factories, in their backyard shanties, cleaning passages, working in the fields or attending union meetings, give documentary support to the stories told by the women. One wonders if the white businessmen who occupied the sumptuous boardroom would approve of the black cleaning lady putting her feet onto the vast conference table so that she could polish the middle! Striking contrasts of a black woman waitress serving immaculately dressed white women guests at a cocktail party dramatically reveal the racial divisions among women in South Africa. Another photograph of black women workers together with their white colleagues - on whose behalf they had recently struck - shows one unfortunately rare instance where common struggle against unfair employers has overcome racial divisions.

In the main, the book deals with resistance by women at an individual level.

Aside from the section on organising

women workers, which deals with the struggle of women workers to achieve their rights, especially in the area of maternity benefits, the book shows individual women reacting to and attempting to cope with their situation.

Scant reference, however, is made to the struggles of women against the introduction of passes for women in the 1950s, or to the widespread resistance to rural relocation, led in many instances by women. Women have a proud tradition of resistance dating back to the early part of the century. The book would have benefited by a larger section dealing with this.

Even with this omission, the book is probably the most embracing account by black working women of life under apartheid. As such it will probably be an eye-opener, even to seasoned South Africa-watchers. It will certainly be a shocking exposure of the average employer in South Africa.

Peter Lowe

BOOKS RECENTLY RECEIVED BY AB:

The Growth of Manufacturing Industry in Tanzania: An Economic History, by M S Silver. *Westview Press, 5500 Central Avenue, Boulder, Colorado 80301, USA, 1984. 312pp. £25 in UK.*

Introduction to Business Management, by Nonyelu G Nwokoye and Augustine I Ahiauzu. *Macmillan, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, UK, 1985. 281pp. £6.50.*

Economics of Agricultural Development in Tropical Africa, by Seth La-Anyane. *John Wiley & Sons, Baffins Lane, Chichester, West Sussex, UK. 150pp. £14.*

Recurrent Costs and Agricultural Development, edited by John Howell. *Overseas Development Institute, 10 Percy Street, London W1, UK, 1985. 217pp. £11.95.*

The Rise and Fall of Nigeria's Second Republic, 1979-84, by Toyin Falola and Julius Ihonubere. *Zed Books, 57 Caledonian Road, London N19, UK, 1985. 272pp. £6.95 pb, £18.95 hb.*