

Interview with Rob Petersen SC

on Friday 5 September 2003 at his chambers in central Cape Town

(for purposes of the 'Presidential Project' on the history of the struggle in South Africa)

Interviewer: Mr Jabulani Sithole

Also present: Prof Martin Legassick and Ms Thozama April

(This transcript has been edited, with some corrections, clarifications and additions inserted, by Rob Petersen. Apart from minor improvements in wording, what was not actually expressed during the interview has been identified by square brackets)

Jabulani Sithole: I must say first and foremost we really appreciate that you have given us an opportunity to talk to you about this period, because we feel it's quite important. What I would love to do is to begin very early on. I understand you were involved in the trade unions long before you went outside the country. Could you take us through your involvement with the trade union movement, say when you began to move into the trade unions and why.

Rob Petersen: Yes. May I say first of all that I very much welcome this opportunity. Thank you very much for coming to see me. This is quite old history now and I am, I think, quite rusty. There are things that I would like to dig up again to refresh my memory in response to the questions you that put to me, and so it may be that I will say very little in this particular interview other than to register what it is that you want to pursue, and then I will come back to you perhaps with something in writing and we can pursue the discussion further on the basis of that. But, I must say that I may well make mistakes during this particular interview in regard to facts and dates and sequences of events, and I wouldn't like to leave those uncorrected. So if that's understood, I am very happy to continue.

Jabulani Sithole: It is understood very well, and it's accepted. As we explained earlier on [before the tape was switched on], we would actually appreciate whatever contribution you make at this point and pursue things accordingly afterwards.

Rob Petersen: My own background, for what it's worth, is that I grew up in Port Elizabeth. I went to school there and during my high school years I was at boarding school [Grey High School]; my parents then left Port Elizabeth; and after school I went to university in Cape Town. I went overseas to the United States on an [American Field Service] exchange

scholarship in 1967-68 — went to school in Dallas, Texas, for a year [St Mark's School of Texas]; then came back to the University of Cape Town, and completed my BA degree [in 1970].

During this period, although I had considered myself since school days to be to the left of the Progressive Party, I decided — rather than to get involved in student politics — to get involved in party politics. So I joined the then Progressive Party, in the youth section, and ended up as the National Chairman of the Young Progressives, which allowed me to sit in on the executive committee meetings of the party. I was there when the change-over took place from the leadership of Jan Steytler to the leadership of Collin Eglin. Eglin reorganised the Progressive Party head office, and he raised money — exactly where from I didn't know, but I came to believe that it must have been from big business in Johannesburg — to have a full-time party headquarters, and he asked me to come in as what was grandly called national youth director. I agreed to do that on a part-time basis, and Horst Kleinschmidt came in as deputy, and we organised white liberal youth from that point of view.

I continued then with my LLB degree [in 1971] on a part-time basis, but I started to raise questions [in my mind] about what this party fundamentally represented, and I came to the conclusion that, while it represented many good intentions, ultimately the intentions revolved around those of the capitalists, of big business. [I concluded that it would not and could not bring about fundamental change.] And I began to move to the left. By the end of 1971 I gave up that part-time job and then tried to complete [the remaining one-and-a-half years of] my LLB in one year, which I succeeded in doing in 1972. [My formal resignation from the Progressive Party was in 1972.]

During 1972 I was involved in some events. [There had been a clash between the police and demonstrating UCT students at St George's Cathedral, at which I was not present. Over the next few days, however, there followed] a clash with the police on the University campus, [in which I was involved, as well as further confrontations at the Cathedral, where I got arrested briefly but was never charged]. I remember I was involved in bringing a damages action against the security police for throwing me down the steps [at UCT]. All of this was very good [for me] because it woke me up. Then, also in 1972, the house that I was living in with Geoff Budlender in Mowbray was petrol bombed by, we believe, a right wing organisation called Scorpio, but the police never pursued it. All these things assisted me in, I think, wising up a little bit about South Africa.

Also [in 1972, or perhaps as late as 1973], I encountered Steve Biko, who was a friend of Paula Ensor's, and she (as she would have told you) came through that period in NUSAS when black students [led by Biko] were beginning to mark themselves out as a distinct force, and which led to the formation of SASO. I must say that Steve Biko impressed me tremendously. I don't think I have ever encountered anybody else who combined the political courage that he had with the ability to express himself clearly and — in the quietest and most dignified way — to challenge people to come up to more than they would otherwise have been. Looking back now I would rate him second only to Mandela among the greatest South Africans — certainly the greatest that I have ever met. So I would say that was also a factor in just prodding me towards an involvement in what was clearly going to develop as a crisis in this country, and how to solve it.

In 1973, I started practice here at the Bar in Cape Town. I can't remember in which month of that year occurred the Durban Strikes. (*Martin Legassick*: End of January.) Now I may be mixing up my sequence of events here, but what stays in my mind is that the Durban strikes represented, for people like me, the appearance on the stage of history of a force that was for the first time capable, in our lifetimes or rather conscious lifetimes, [of bringing change]. Of course, [having regard for example to] the 1950s, a period on which Martin has written extensively, this was not in fact something absolutely new but nevertheless it was qualitatively new, the Durban strikes.

A number of people whom I knew in Cape Town started organising — they may have started before the Durban strikes, but I think it was much stimulated by the Durban strikes — particularly [white students] from the

University, to get access into the African working-class community here. Among those people I would mention particularly Jeannette Curtis: her role in that regard needs to be gone into. Paula, I think, can help with that. Gordon Young, [who worked from a base in the Wages Commission at UCT,] was very important in that regard. Gordon had contact with Elijah Loza [who was to die in detention in August 1977]. I never met Elijah, but it was people like Jeannette, Paula, Gordon who prodded me towards getting involved in the workers' movement. My recollection is that it would have been against the background of the Durban strikes. When was Paula banned? (*Martin Legassick*: I'm not sure, but it was just after the Durban Strikes.)¹

Rob Petersen: I must emphasise for the purpose of the recording that I am conscious of my memory being very rusty here, and what I am really just giving you at this stage are those impressions which are in my mind now, but I will have to substantiate them for myself and correct anything that is incorrect and perhaps add to it.

[As far as I recall, John Frankish, then still a medical student, was one of those who played a crucial active role in the development from the outset, far more so than I did.]

Whose idea it was I don't recall, but somebody had contact with Zora Mehlomakulu. She was very important in that she had been a SACTU organiser, a very fine person, [and through contact with her] eventually the decision was made to form an advice office, an advice bureau [—the Western Province Workers' Advice Bureau —] rather than attempt to organise trade unions directly [here]. On the basis of the movement in Durban, as Dave Hemson will have described to you, unions came immediately onto the agenda [there]. In Johannesburg there was an attempt to follow that. In Cape Town the situation was strongly characterised at that time by the fact that the African people were a minority, they felt themselves to be isolated. There had been the history of African resistance politics in the Western Cape, which had left a legacy with the older generation particularly that you can't do anything — and the youth had at that stage not yet moved. In fact when we tried to organise, a question went round among the workers: "Is this not Poqo coming back?" A great suspicion that maybe these are people with a political agenda who are going to get us into trouble.

¹ [In fact, it was in February 1973.]

Here we simply could not have moved directly to the formation of unions based on the African workers.

Now I don't know how many months and how many discussions it took us to work all this out. I'm presenting it as if it was obvious; it wasn't obvious. But we made a conscious decision not to start with the organisation of coloured workers; not because we didn't regard it as vital to involve them in the new unionism — that was necessary — but simply because the existing union organisations [based essentially on coloured workers] were hopelessly bureaucratised and conservative, based really on the 'coloured preference' [policy]. I don't know if it was formally a 'coloured preference area' yet at that stage, but certainly that was the situation in practice. And so the way we went about it was that we opened an advice office [in order to reach African industrial workers].

Where in Cape Town, we asked ourselves, can we open such an advice office? You could not get premises anywhere in an African township; you couldn't do it in the centre of town because African people couldn't effectively come into town [freely at that time unless they were employed there, without attracting attention].

We — I can't remember now who actually did it, it wasn't me — succeeded in getting the co-operation of a man called Peters who was an organiser for the coloured Labour Party. They had an office in the Benbow Building in [Beverley Street,] Athlone. You wouldn't expect that they would have helped us at all, but on the contrary they allowed us to use [one of] their office[s] in order to organise African workers, or to run an advice office.

We used to go there on a Saturday afternoon, [and workers would arrive, making the journey from Langa or Guguletu or Nyanga, having been informed by Zora and others that they could come and get advice.] You know how it is with workers: they want to tell you the story from the very beginning to the very end. So when somebody came with a problem, one would sit down and hear the whole story, and at the end of it perhaps all it needed was for a letter to be written. So we would write the letter. That was the advice office. But then, occasionally, there would come up the kind of problem [which clearly needed organised strength to resolve, and] where you would say to the person:

"Tell me, are you the only one at your factory with this kind of problem?"

"No, everybody's got it."

"Now, is there anybody amongst the workers of your factory whom you would regard as a leader?"

"Oh yes."

We would say "Can you come back next Saturday afternoon and bring that person?" It developed from that.

Without ever talking about a trade union, my recollection is that we succeeded under the umbrella of an advice bureau in organising about 10 000 workers in some forty factories.² [Pause, while coffee and tea are served.] Am I telling you the things that you want to hear, or am I off the subject?

Jabulani Sithole: No, no, it's very fascinating for me. I think this is meaty (if you are not a vegetarian and you are not going to be offended). It's quite meaty and that's what I'm interested in.

Rob Petersen: All right, but I must emphasise that there are other people who can tell you much more, and much more reliably. So it developed.

We then got the co-operation of people — again it was coloured people — who used to go and have a drink on a Saturday afternoon; they were called the British Ex-Servicemen's League. They were old Second World War veterans who had this [ramshackle] building, also in Athlone, where you could actually go and have a meeting [without attracting too much attention]. When it rained, the rain came in, and there were big gaps between the floor boards, and so forth. In one room [next to the little hall] they had a bar where they used to go and have their drinks, while we used to go there with African factory workers and have education meetings in the hall. 'Education' being a serious and honest term, but it was also the cover under which we could discuss organisation and where this thing's going. This went on for a long time.

[The Wages Commission brought out an occasional paper for the workers, called *Abasebenzi*, which was distributed through the networks organised by the Advice Bureau. Gordon Young, with a small editorial group, produced it. I remember writing some pieces for *Abasebenzi*, which were translated into Xhosa. I remember also that we brought out a broadsheet, possibly under the auspices of the Advice Bureau, on the issue of 'works

² [Using the device of works committees permitted under the Bantu Labour Settlement of Disputes Act.]

committees' versus 'liaison committees' under the Bantu Labour Relations Act, exposing lies told by the Department of Labour.

Unfortunately, I don't believe I have managed to keep any of these publications.

[What I do have is a file of about a hundred pages from a document in English and Xhosa, entitled 'Training manual for unions, works committees and benefit societies'³ which was produced by 'Workers' Advisory Project, c/o Western Province Workers' Advice Bureau' and published by the Wages Commission at UCT. Included in it was quite a lot of basic historical material about how the land was taken, how the South African proletariat was created, and a primer on how capitalism works and how profits are made from the exploitation of labour. Most of this material was written by Paula — anonymously of course because she was banned and could not legally write anything for publication.]

Jeremy Baskin has written a book [which deals with] the history of the Western Province Workers' Advice Bureau. Paula and I have both been air-brushed totally out of that book, but there may be some useful facts in there which (I would say, subject to checking) you could probably rely on.

[As the recollections come back to me I shall try to] give you the names of particularly important personalities that I remember coming up from among the workers, because leadership started to blossom.

What I recall is that as soon as the workers began to feel some strength, which they had not felt before, they immediately started to discuss politics. Perhaps this was facilitated by the fact that we did not have a trade union framework; we didn't have an industrial union framework. In fact we made the mistake — I saw it subsequently as a mistake — of trying to maintain a general union, of all African workers in the Western Cape (not exclusively African workers but that's what essentially it was moving towards). We were acutely conscious of the sense of weakness that the workers had, and that we were pioneering something here without really knowing where [it would lead], or whether it was going to succeed. And we were very resistant to the idea of workers becoming divided up into industrial groupings where they would concentrate only on the problems in their own factories. As it turned out I think we were wrong because that's the natural way in which a

trade union movement develops, and we didn't have a clear enough idea as to how to combine industrial organisation with political organisation.

On this general point, that as soon as the workers felt strong they wanted to talk politics, I recall very vividly — I can't put a date on it — a meeting at which a decision was made to form a kind of regional council of workers' leaders for the area, and it immediately came up in that meeting that they wanted to discuss pass laws. Now you know from the history of South Africa that was very serious business.

Jabulani Sithole: Yes, that's politics.

Rob Petersen: And very serious politics. Now why that has stuck in my mind is, I think, because it forced me to think. "If that is where this is going, are we serious or not? If we are serious, what do we do?"

[At that time, the early '70s, there was a lot of interest among South African left intellectuals in revolution — more particularly in revolutions abroad. The banning of books in South Africa was uneven, and it was possible to pick up quite interesting stuff from time to time in bookshops. Paula and I had both been reading Marxist literature. In fact she had received a volume containing part of Marx's *Capital* as a school prize! We were also very fortunate to have access to an old box of books and pamphlets by Marx, Engels and Lenin which had been left behind by someone who had gone into exile in the 1960s. So we got hold of *The Communist Manifesto*, Lenin's *State and Revolution* and *What is to be Done?*, and so forth. I managed to buy the Everyman edition of the first volume of *Capital*, I think in a bookshop on Church Square. For a period we attended a *Capital* reading group.]

I had [also] picked up works by [and about] Trotsky. [I read Deutscher's three-volume biography of Trotsky, and also Trotsky's three-volume *History of the Russian Revolution*, which I think I found at the bookshop in Stuttafords, in Adderley Street.] I was in any event critical of the regime in the Soviet Union, which I regarded as a dictatorship and certainly not as representing any kind of socialism that I was trying to achieve. I found in the works of Trotsky very satisfying answers to many of the questions that I posed or were posed.

[While Paula may not have shared all my opinions on that at that time, there was nothing in any of our reading or experience, or in international events, which would have led us to expect a way forward from the S. A. Communist Party, which was in any case not to be found. As an organisation, it had relocated

³ ['Incwadi yoqeqesho lwe manyano iikomiti zabasebenzi ne mibutho yoncedo.']

to exile, retreated to the ineffective strategy of so-called 'armed struggle', and had no evident part to play in the re-emergence of the movement of the African workers.]

There was, let's emphasise, no actual presence of the ANC at that time. There were particular individuals who represented an historical connection with the ANC, such as Elijah Loza, and Zora Mehlomakulu (in her case a different kind of connection). Zora was very keen on the independence of the working class. Elijah, I think, leaned more towards just "What are the instructions from Lusaka?" But you could not say that there was any *presence* of the ANC among the workers. We never encountered such a thing when we organised, and nobody said "ANC". Of course they were careful about us because, particularly with white youth, they would say to themselves: these people from the University, this lawyer and so on, why are they here? What is their interest? Look at what their fathers do. I think that it took, in the case of Paula and myself, easily two years to get trusted, just by working at it steadily like you do in the trade union movement.

But this was heading in a political direction. Paula was banned; she couldn't go to those meetings [as she was not allowed to be in a gathering with more than one other person at a time]. I used to go to the meetings then report to her. She must have been terribly frustrated. [We were living in Woodstock, and Zora and sometimes Barnet Ntsodo (another full-time organiser) used to come and see Paula secretly for discussions on the Advice Bureau work, usually during the day when I was not there.]

In structuring the Advice Bureau [as an umbrella for the organisation of African industrial workers], we very deliberately insisted that the executive committee which ran the Advice Bureau should consist of workers. There may have been one or two organisers on it, but essentially it was [composed of workers] elected by workers.

I remember [the founding] meeting, where the workers present wanted us [— the handful of whites like myself who had been involved in setting it up,] to come onto the committee. We said no, it's your organisation and it must be independently run by workers. But then we had a board of trustees, of which I was a member: the board of trustees of the Western Province Workers' Advice Bureau. [We included on this board one or two respected, but far from radical, officials of registered unions (basically coloured unions) who were prepared to lend their respectability to the organisation in order to

protect it. Not surprisingly, as things developed, this didn't last.]

[On the activist side, the key members of the board of trustees were, as I recall, John Frankish, Johan Maree, and myself.] We used to meet [regularly, but informally,] with Zora [and Barnet Ntsodo to discuss the organising work]. The organisers would meet with the [elected] executive committee, and the decisions were ultimately made there, although I don't think it can be doubted that the [discussions at the] informal meetings prior to the executive meetings had an influence on what eventually was decided by the workers. [From time to time we would also meet with some of the more go-ahead individual members of the executive committee. The chairman of the executive committee, Mr Msutwana (as everyone called him), was not included in the informal strategy and tactics discussions. He was a very cautious and dignified old gentleman, a bank messenger who worked in the city centre, and who insisted on opening every meeting with a prayer. Despite many of us seeing him as an obstacle to developing the organisation, he was always able to get himself re-elected at the annual general meetings without any difficulty at all.]

[Gordon Young, who remained active in the Wages Commission, was in frequent contact with Zora, Elijah and others, although not directly involved, I think, in the Advice Bureau structures. As I have mentioned, Paula engaged regularly in individual discussions conducted elsewhere, since she was banned. Judy Favish became heavily involved, initially as a literacy trainer, and went on to play a very important role. As with John Frankish, her knowledge of the history of the Advice Bureau will be very extensive. Steve Lewis and Jeremy Baskin used to attend educational meetings in the British Ex-Servicemen's League hall but had no involvement, that I can recall, in the informal activist discussions with the organisers which I have described. At one point D'Arcy du Toit became involved and was included in those discussions — but then abruptly left to go abroad. According to the explanation he offered at the time, he had come to the conclusion that the work amounted to no more than "economism", and he did not want to be involved in it further. I do not recall whether he was formally a member of the board of trustees. He had been eager for a political role, but Paula and I had not included him in our directly political discussions with key workers, to which I shall refer shortly.]

[There were evident differences of approach emerging,] ideological differences [not only] on the board of trustees, [but also among the group

of activists who were steering the course of development. These differences became more pronounced as the workers began to feel their strength and move towards taking up issues of a more political character. There was also an increasing sense of hostile attention from the state.] At a certain point Paula and I started meeting secretly with some of the worker leaders, [where we directly discussed political questions]. Alpheus Ndude (who later married Hilda — I never knew Hilda) was one. [When Alpheus was asked by us about his pass, he would smile and say “it got destroyed”, meaning that he had burned it years before. He was at constant risk of arrest and removal from the Western Cape as a result.] Another was ‘Story’ Luke Mazwembe. [Story worked for a firm of monumental masons. At one point he was arrested and sjambokked severely by the police (almost certainly in an attempt to intimidate him), before being released. Later he was employed by the Advice Bureau.] I think we also had secret meetings with Wilson Sidina, and with one or two others, in which we discussed politics.⁴

[Pause, while tape is changed.] Am I still giving you what you want, by the way?

Jabulani Sithole: I don’t know what you think, Martin, but it’s important, ... it gives us meaty stuff of how organisation begins here in the Western Cape.

Rob Petersen: I must emphasise again that other people may be able to correct me, but I’m giving you the main political logic of the thing as I remember it.

Jabulani Sithole: It’s quite useful, honestly, and I must say it’s quite rich.

Rob Petersen: Now I can no longer remember who attended what discussions. [Zora did not attend these directly political discussions, although she may have been aware of them.]

In 1973, I was just starting practice as an advocate here at the Cape Bar. I initially had ‘chambers’ [i.e. a room] down the bottom of this street, [Keerom Street]; then in 1974 we

[advocates] all moved into a new building, just across [from where we are sitting now], that’s sixteen floors high: Huguenot Chambers.

Paula and I got married [on 22 August] 1974. She was banned, but she got permission to go to Durban, and we got married there. It was during 1974, I think, that we broke her banning order [which confined her to Cape Town and Wynberg magisterial districts] and we went and stayed in a hotel in St James, on the [False Bay] coast, in order to have a discussion without the danger of being bugged. There we decided that we would have to try to form a political organisation, and then we deliberately cultivated contact with very carefully chosen leading elements from among these factory workers, drawing them in and discussing — because, as I say, it had been manifested to us in these meetings with the workers that once we got any serious strength that we were going to develop in a political direction, and we had to be responsible about that. And certainly we didn’t think we had answers, we just knew we had a problem.

Following the Portuguese revolution [which broke out in April 1974, when the Armed Forces Movement overthrew Caetano, negotiations began with the national liberation movements in the Portuguese colonies, including with Frelimo in Mozambique. Independence for Mozambique followed in June 1975. In the interim, Frelimo had to move rapidly from its rural bases to fill the vacuum in the towns, forming a provisional government in what is now Maputo.]

[I think it was at the end of 1974 or early in 1975 that] I got on an airplane in Durban and flew to what was then Lourenço Marques (i.e. Maputo), because I wanted to see what an African revolution looked like. Mozambique was then in the middle of the change-over.

There were Frelimo cars driving around with armed guards and so forth. Basically I just wandered around and met up with students who [took me to meetings and] introduced me to various people, and I remember having a discussion with someone who was going to take over as [Frelimo’s] Minister of Agriculture. So I just had a little bit of an adventure there and came back.

It was becoming clearer to me — I would say to both of us — that we didn’t know what the hell we were doing, and that, if we were serious, we had better find out from the history of the revolutionary struggle, more than what we could work out for ourselves, how to develop this thing [in South Africa].

⁴ [I recall Daniel Thebe, a Sotho-speaker who lived in Guguletu, playing for a time an important role in Advice Bureau affairs and becoming quite close to Paula and myself. However, for reasons which I could never pin down, there was a falling out between him and other leading workers, after which he dropped out — or was perhaps forced out — of activity. In those days organisational activities were so subterranean that much was done which was never explained.]

I was already in my mind very critical in regard to what I knew of the African National Congress. I regarded it as a nationalist organisation; I saw the solution to South Africa's problems in terms of workers' power. That would essentially be African industrial workers' power. I did not think that anything would be solved by any kind of nationalism. Certainly the ANC was not, as I have said, really present in the Western Cape, except that there were a few individuals who were a kind of historical legacy. There was no Communist Party to be found, and even if I had found it I would have not liked the fact that it represented the regime in the Soviet Union.

We had been reading [Marx, Engels, Lenin and] Trotsky, and the natural tendency was then that we moved on the basis of this experience of the workers towards trying to form a workers' political organisation. But how do you do that? We didn't know. So we said, let's go back and see whether we can find anybody that is still connected with the Bolshevik revolution. We knew very well that the so-called 'Trotskyists' would be of no use to us, because they had splintered into any number of sects which just conducted sharp doctrinal debates with each other and were of no use to the working class.

Nevertheless we looked around. We continued here: I had chambers across there [in Huguenot Chambers]. On the thirteenth floor there was a library, the advocates' library — a place where you keep very quiet and go and study the [law] books. On a Sunday afternoon, a group of these workers and I, with Paula sometimes, would gather and go secretly into the library where we were sure there was no bugging, and we would have a discussion on *The Communist Manifesto* or whatever. I remember the security guard used to sort of wink at us and let us in[to the building]. So we discussed *The Communist Manifesto*, we discussed imperialism, and we discussed the importance of organising an underground political cadre of workers.

In those meetings people like Alpheus Ndude [would, on occasion,] bring up the question of the ANC. Speaking for myself, I was always very sceptical. [My thinking was:] These are people who, to the extent that they have survived, are either on Robben Island where they can't do anything at the moment, or they are in exile, in Lusaka or elsewhere. [In exile] they seem to have got themselves tied up with African governments and also with the governments in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. They don't seem to have any plan for overthrowing the government in this country. That was how it looked. But anyway, I heard what Alpheus and others said.

It was sometime during 1975 — I am going to just sketch this very briefly and, Martin, you must not hesitate to correct me if I get things wrong — a connection was opened up with a Trotskyist grouping operating in Britain which had succeeded in organising a significant presence inside the British Labour Party and particularly with the Labour Party youth movement, the Young Socialists. [Their paper was called the *Militant*, and they became known as the Militant Tendency. Later, they secured several seats in the British parliament, as Labour MPs, but with everyone knowing clearly what they stood for, and became a significant force in the Liverpool City Council in the confrontation with the Thatcher government over public spending cuts, and in the struggle against the poll tax (which was victorious), and so forth. It was their integral involvement with the labour and trade union movement at that time which distinguished them, in our view, from the myriad 'Trotskyist' sects, and which attracted us to them.]

[Early in 1976, I think in February,] I went over to the UK, pretending to be briefed in a divorce case with a South African element.⁵ I packed Hahlo's *Law of Husband and Wife* in my suitcase, and I went over to London and had about a week of discussions with these people, and then I smuggled back [some of] their political writings. [These were photographically reduced specially for me in their printing works in London and, together with my own notes in very small writing, were concealed inside a talcum powder container with a bit of powder left at the top.]

Paula and I discussed the material and, to cut the story short, we came to the conclusion that we would need to go out of the country for a period, in order to learn. Now if I had to decide over again, I am not sure I would have left [South Africa at that point], but on the other hand we did have the priceless advantage of exposure to left wing politics abroad.

Martin Legassick: Can I just interrupt you there to ask you something which you might not want to answer now, but to what extent were the African workers you were discussing with consciously aware of why you were going overseas? What was their attitude towards the formation of a party?

⁵ [Peter Collins, an attorney who had assisted the Advice Bureau, and with whom I used to have political discussions over beers at the Fairmead Hotel, had made contact with the Militant Tendency during a visit to Britain, and was instrumental in enabling me to make this trip.]

Rob Petersen: That's a very good question. Had it actually come to the question of the formation of a party, we might have found them raising much more definitely, "What about the ANC?" — and, who knows, even the question of the Communist Party and whether it would come back.

We were very tentative. We used to have these political discussions, and we had under those conditions quite an advanced political relationship. It had also got somewhat dangerous, in that you would get sometimes a situation of [one of the participants] coming up and saying [privately], we can't go on meeting with so-and-so because we suspect he might be a spy.

[You may notice that I do not use the word "comrades" in relation to this period — a word that became habitual later. At that time, use of such terminology, at least in our area, would have been regarded as foolish by those seriously involved in that early work of laying foundations for a mass movement, because slip-ups tend to happen and the security police seemed able then to observe and jump on anything that moved.]

At the same time we were naïve and inexperienced, so I think that it was at that stage still exploratory on our part. It took us some time after we were in the UK before we joined the Militant Tendency. I initially didn't want to join, and I think Paula thought the same. After a while they persuaded us. However, we hadn't gone there to join up: it was exploratory [although with serious implications because, having made the move, we would not be able simply to return and carry on as before].

[In preparing the move], we had to keep everything very secret. We had a place in Woodstock; we thought it was bugged; Paula was banned. We had to get her out of the country, and I think for three months we prepared, never being able to talk in the house about what we were going to do, while we packed up and everything. In many ways it was too 'underground', but one learns these things only from experience.

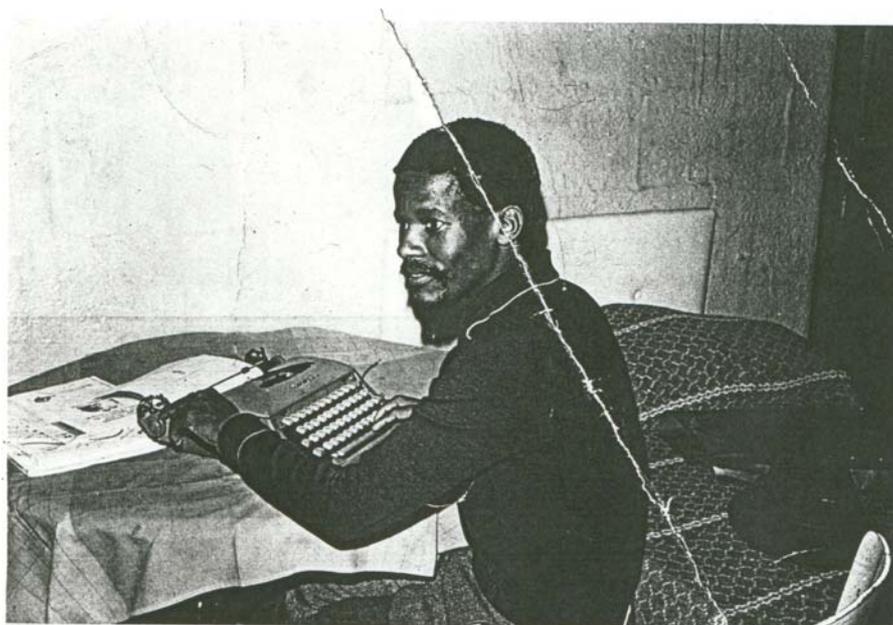
I did seriously take one particular worker leader aside — Story Mazwembe. We met one evening [after dark] in the forest behind UCT, up on the mountain side, and I explained to him what we were planning to do. [This was in May 1976, shortly before we left.] I don't know that he could have disagreed with us, or agreed with us independently. He seemed to agree, and said he thought it was a good thing. I think he wanted us to make contact with the ANC, but, coming from the ideological perspective I was

coming from, I perhaps didn't take that seriously enough at the time.

Unfortunately [in September of that year] he'd been arrested, and within hours of his arrest he was dead — hanging from the bars. Now whether they hanged him or he hanged himself in order not to give information, I don't know. [He has been recognised by the TRC as a victim of gross human rights abuse.⁶] You may remember, [Martin] — I think you were there when we got the news — that this broke a very important link in explaining what we were doing.

⁶ [From Volume 3 Chapter 5 of TRC Report: "*Western Province Workers' Advice Bureau employee Luke Mazwembe (32) died in the Caledon Square police headquarters in Cape Town. His death was officially described as "suicide by hanging". He was arrested on 2 September 1976 at 06h00 and was found dead at 07h40 in the corner of a police cell, hanging from the ceiling by a noose made of strips of blanket tied together with pieces of twine. A razor blade had been used to cut the blanket into strips and to cut the twine. The police were unable to explain how the razor blade and twine had got into the cell.*"]

"At the inquest the police asserted that they had not assaulted Mazwembe. The state pathologist said that Mazwembe had several wounds to his body, including neck abrasions, swelling and bruising of his right cheekbone, slight swelling of the lower scrotum, several abrasions over both shoulder blades and abrasions on the left ankle. Under cross-examination, he stated that he could not exclude the possibility that Mazwembe had been killed and then hanged to fake a suicide: the neck wounds were compatible with either explanation. The magistrate ruled that Mazwembe was neither tortured nor assaulted by the police, and assumed that the twine and razor blade had been accidentally left in the cell by an unknown person.""]



'Story' Luke Mazwembe

I naïvely thought that we would be a couple of years abroad, and then find a way to come back. The way things ended up, it was fourteen years. But part of that was because, while we were abroad, we went into the ANC. In due course I shall give you an explanation, if you would like one, about why we did that, and with what understanding — what we were attempting to achieve. But quite rapidly our involvement in the ANC became exposed because of political differences which surfaced, and it became impossible after that just to return to the country. Had we done so, [we would either have been arrested on the spot or], if we were not arrested we would have been branded as spies. So it ended up with a situation where we had to stick it out, and try to recreate channels of [political] communication with the country.

Many things I wouldn't handle now as I handled them then. But that broadly is the first part of a very general explanation. I don't know if I am still on the track that you wanted me to cover.

Jabulani Sithole: No, I think it's quite important; it has covered more than I thought on how you actually got into this. But before we pursue developments outside, I would love to go back to your experience in Durban. You mentioned before we went on record that at one point someone in the trade union movement discussed [with you in Durban] the issue of Inkatha wanting trade unions to get under their ambit. Could you go over that?

Rob Petersen: Yes. Again I am quite hazy now, only certain things stick in my memory. When the Advice Bureau was formed and was under way here, links were formed with what was developing by way of trade union organisation in Durban and also Johannesburg. I remember meeting Dave Hemson in Cape Town [although that may have been as early as 1972]. I remember also an occasion where a number of us went to Durban for a national meeting, where organisers came from Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town.

I remember [gathering at a house in a valley, where] we could identify the security police looking at us through a telescope from the top of a hill, when we were trying to have a discussion. Whether it was on that occasion [I don't recall, but] I think it was in 1974 that I was staying at Paula's mother's house in Umbilo, Durban, and Johnny Copelyn, who had taken a very active role in the union movement, knocked on the door. He wanted to have a discussion. [Paula being banned], he wanted to have a discussion with me, and we walked round the sports field of a local high school for an hour or so.

I remember him raising that a serious approach had been made to the union movement from Inkatha — from whom in Inkatha I am not quite sure — to bring the union movement of African workers in under the wing of Inkatha, because in that way they would be 'protected'. I was immediately absolutely opposed to that. I hesitate now to say with certainty what my analysis was of Inkatha itself

at that time, because I might be reconstructing on the basis of conclusions that I drew later. But I do remember simply proceeding from the basis that the workers' organisations must be independent class organisations, the trade union movement in particular, and that under no circumstances should the unions become involved with Inkatha. Whether that view was shared by Johnny Copelyn at that time or not I can't remember, but I do remember it was quite a long discussion.

Jabulani Sithole: What direction was the discussion taking? Was he trying to persuade, to reason with you, to allow the process to take place or not?

Rob Petersen: I think he had come to discuss it as a very serious prospect, but it would not be right for me to say now, on the basis of my present state of memory, what his position exactly was on that.

Jabulani Sithole: What I would like to move on to is your experience outside [South Africa]. You had moved outside. You mentioned this important transition you are making: here you are, coming from inside the country where you had gathered some experience and arrived at a conclusion that it was necessary for the worker movement to be independent ...

Rob Petersen: And political.

Jabulani Sithole: ... but when you get outside, you then find yourself in the ranks of the ANC external mission.

Rob Petersen: How did that happen?

Jabulani Sithole: Yes, how did that happen?

Rob Petersen: It happened roughly as follows. We left in May 1976, crossing into Botswana. I had a passport [and so could exit via a border post]. Paula was banned [, with no passport]: she had to walk [across during the night], and I picked her up on the other side of the border. We were then in Botswana for about ten weeks. During that time, [on June 16th 1976] Soweto erupted. We then got to Britain, and we started our discussions with these comrades [of the Militant Tendency]. This Trotskyist organisation had organised links in quite a number of other countries.

Of particular importance is a man by the name of Ted Grant, who actually comes from South Africa — he was born in Germiston [shortly before the First World War]. He [became a convinced Marxist at the age of 15,] adhered to early Trotskyist groupings, and was involved in the labour movement [(in particular the African Laundry Workers' Union in Johannesburg)]. In [1934 he moved to London.] When you recall what was going on in Europe in the 1930s —

the rise of fascism, Nazism in Germany, a huge tumult in France, [revolution and] civil war in Spain, the whole situation moving towards the Second World War — under those circumstances Ted concluded [early on] that the really important place to be was there, and so he went and has remained there ever since. He recently celebrated his 90th birthday. I have probably learned more politically from him than from any other single person, although I disagree with him on some quite fundamental things now.

We said: you can see from Soweto, revolution is brewing now at last. The youth have responded — and I believe, by the way, that what Steve Biko and his comrades did in the late '60s, and the movement of the Durban workers in the 1973, were what provided the basis upon which the youth then actually entered politics in the big way that they did in Soweto, [in June 1976]. But that in itself then made a phenomenal contribution towards moving the country towards overthrowing the regime. That would still obviously take a long time. I don't know what your recollections are of '76, and the influence it had?

Jabulani Sithole: It had some limitations in Natal. I think Natal quiet honestly is one area where it didn't have an impact. There were in the case of Marian Hill, before I came, some strikes but they were of a quite limited nature: they were bread and butter issues in college. In 1976, in fact what happened is that a lot of the youth from Soweto and other places ended up at St Francis College, because parents who to a large extent were conservative and didn't want them involved in politics sent them to Natal, and it would take a long time. Quite interestingly it took about four years, because in 1980 you could see the presence of the Soweto youth within Marian Hill, so that when there were those strikes and boycotts by students in Durban in 1980, Marian Hill got involved and I would actually see that as an extension of the Soweto experience into Marian Hill. So it didn't have a direct impact, but of course that doesn't mean that it went by and people didn't know what was happening; but organisationally in terms of the movement not so much in Natal.

Rob Petersen: It does take time, I think. When did the youth start to move in the Western Cape?

Martin Legassick: It was in '76, we've studied and we've done interviews. From about August '76, in Langa and Guguletu, there were demonstrations, but I mean the big Cape thing was in 1980, the big storm.

Rob Petersen: You need to speak to Irene Barendilla [(now Charnley)].

Martin Legassick: Businesswoman of the year.

Rob Petersen: Yes, but she wasn't at that time.

Martin Legassick: I often tell her story to people.

Rob Petersen: Maybe you should revisit her and find out what she actually remembers.

But [to return to the thread,] we said to Ted [Grant]: "The African National Congress is a bourgeois nationalist organisation. It was not successful in the past; it squandered the mass support that it had. There is now a home-grown independent African working class movement that is developing, and that needs to develop onto the political plane, using its industrial strength as a foundation. It can draw the youth towards it. And that is the way in which we will simultaneously solve the problem of white minority rule and the social issue that is posed by capitalism."

He patted us on the head and he said: "There isn't time."

Jabulani Sithole: Can I change my tape? because I want to capture just that. [Tape two.] You say he patted you on the head and said ...?

Rob Petersen: I am speaking figuratively. He said, "There isn't time."

He said, "You are quite right, the workers need their own organisation with their own program. You are quite right that the African National Congress, if we look at it from the point of view of its leadership, is a bourgeois nationalist organisation, and the fact that the Communist Party is so influential in the ANC doesn't change that — on the contrary, it helps to harden that position." (Now that's another discussion, and I don't want to sidetrack onto that at the moment.)

Ted continued: "When the revolution really begins, it will be the ANC." We said, "What do you mean? The ANC is not even there; its people are in exile and on Robben Island. When the youth moved in 1976, did they take up the flag of the ANC? No! That was black consciousness."

He said: "Don't exaggerate 1976. When it really begins, it will be the ANC. Mark my words."

"Why?"

"Because, when hundreds of thousands and millions of ordinary working class people get involved in politics, it's not because they like being involved in politics. It's because they have no alternative: the time has come to do something serious. The activists — the activist

minority must never confuse its own political thinking and its own political role with what happens when the broad masses really move and start to take matters into their own hands. When that happens, which is coming in South Africa" — we agreed on that — "there won't be time for them to consider some new workers' party, even if it is connected with the trade unions. They will look for and pick up the flag which was used in the past and which has got a traditional basis of support in relation to the struggle against white minority rule, against the apartheid government. It will be the ANC."

Jabulani Sithole: Perhaps if I may interrupt you, what he was saying essentially was that your tradition, your history would be more important than the content of the struggle being waged by the ANC.

Rob Petersen: Precisely — and that the working class would try to fill whatever organisation they take up with their own aspirations, demands and so forth.

But, we said, "The leadership is not up to that."

He said: "They will take the exiled leadership by the collar, by the scruff of the neck, and put them in power — whether they are up to it or not. Therefore strategically, if you conclude, as we have concluded, that to solve the problem we must have workers' power and a socialist program, the place to go and put that forward is among the mass of the working class who are taking up the banner of the ANC. That is the place to put it forward.

"If you behave like the sectarians and say, 'No, we've got our own workers' party', firstly you make it easy for your opponents to defeat you. Because they will say to the workers, 'See those people — they want to divide our movement'. And the overwhelmingly important priority when the thing starts" — as he put it — "when it really starts, will be the sense among the black masses that we must not allow ourselves to be divided: we must combine our weight of numbers against this very powerful enemy and anything which looks as though it threatens that unity, however good its ideas maybe, will just be rejected."

So we had to learn that lesson. [From this came the attempt over a number of years to extend the influence of socialist ideas by defining ourselves as the 'Marxist Workers' Tendency of the ANC'.]

As time went by and we had the development of the UDF and so forth — or for that matter, once the unions grew to significant strength — there was that period when the idea of ... how was it articulated by [Joe] Foster and co.? ...

Martin Legassick: Working class politics.

Rob Petersen: Working class politics — I don't think they talked about a workers' party....

Martin Legassick: No, a workers' movement.

Rob Petersen: It was an attempt to define, on the basis of the unions, some kind of independence — independence *from* politics actually. We studied what Engels had to say about that so-called independence of the working class: it is not a true independence. If the working class doesn't move [consciously] into the forefront of politics, it makes itself actually just raw material for [the bourgeois or petit bourgeois] politicians to use. For the working class to actually assert itself as a real factor in politics, it has to be able to go all the way. It has to have a program, which deals with the problems of the entire society. So, although [some of our opponents in Congress, particularly in the Communist Party] called us 'workerists', we were never in fact workerists. That [label] was not correctly applied to us. We always saw it as question of *which politics* — and after we were, I think, very wisely advised by Ted, [we saw it as a question of] which politics should be taken up *within the ranks of Congress*.

We understood immediately when the UDF came on the scene that that was the ANC, that it would become the ANC. We understood this because of what he explained to us, that the exiled leadership would be put at the head of this [movement]. But we believed that the process that would then develop would be that, within this, would occur — forced by circumstances — a struggle over ideas and program to define where this thing was going. And we would either succeed within that context or not succeed at all. Well, as it happened we did not succeed at all — at least not yet!

We no longer treated the ANC as something over there that we disapproved of; we treated the ANC as something within which, [in the course of the revolution], there were at least two tendencies going to struggle for supremacy [i.e. a bourgeois tendency and a working-class tendency]. Now in a way that its still occurring; that is far from resolved.

Martin may disagree with me on this, but I think it is still hopelessly premature to move in the direction of a workers' party. Hopelessly premature. But that is mainly because of the change that has occurred in the international situation, in my view. I am compressing things very much together here; I know we are a bit short of time.

We believed that there would be a civil war. And we believed that it would not be possible to bring South Africa successfully through that unless workers' power was asserted in that civil war, otherwise [the situation] would degenerate into a racial bloodbath. I'm very happy that it didn't happen like that. I discounted the prospects of a negotiated settlement. I think that negotiated settlement only became possible [in fact] because of the changes that took place in the world.

Jabulani Sithole: In the late '80s.

Rob Petersen: In the late '80s, and I am happy that we haven't had to go through a bloodbath. But, of course, there is a lot in this country that still remains unresolved. As it does in the world. Poverty is, if anything, worse. Unemployment is, if anything, worse. I don't say there is a lot that the present government can do about that, there are some things that they can do [which they are not doing], but I still think that is a systemic question. And, from my point of view, it is a question of going back now to the old fundamentals and trying to work them out again in the context of changed [world] conditions.

I think that we ended up hopelessly isolated mainly because the situation didn't develop as we predicted. Had it developed into a serious struggle for power, then a lot of people would have been tested who have in fact not been tested and have merely been able to leap forward into prominent positions and get a lot of benefit from that.

Had it been a real serious struggle to the end for power, I don't know where we would have ended up. But I think the fact that we [as Marxists] have ended up at least for the time being eclipsed is largely because we *mis-*appreciated the direction that events would actually take. There's a whole period now in politics in which there is no space whatsoever for what we represented. Whether that will come back, I don't know.

Jabulani Sithole: I appreciate the point that you are making in the end because it has always been the question I grappled with. Whether the changes internationally — if those changes didn't come about — it's a question I have never been able to resolve on my own.... Without the developments in the late 80s, whether the ANC could have survived. As an academic it's perhaps unfair, but I've put this to students, saying in fact the developments of the late '80s, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the collapse of Eastern Europe, [of] that Soviet empire, basically saved the ANC, because if it was moving in a different direction forces could have been galvanised against it. The state was

becoming even more hardened and of course there was a momentum internally which could have actually left the ANC aside, because of the anger, the demands. The movement inside could have actually, you know, just left the ANC behind. That's a question that I've never really been able to resolve. It seems to me that the changes came so rapidly and the ANC was, if you like, so opportunistic in moving quickly back into the head, as you correctly say, of this. I am amazed that Ted was in a position to foresee that in the '70s. It's quite amazing for me. And then, of course, it's not [just] a question of foreseeing — it's a question of having the correct tools of analysis that you'd be able to see these things. But I would be interested outside this to find out, perhaps later, why you say you disagree on fundamentals with him. But what I would like to capture as well is: Here are the developments leading to your suspension, that very sensitive issue. What do you see as these developments? You have captured this quite well in terms of putting ideas, but what was it that really moved the leadership of the movement to say you are undesirable within its ranks, when in fact you were coming up with ideas that were developing out of a very useful context and a very deep analysis — and that advice by Ted for you to actually get into the ANC. If you could take us through that?

Rob Petersen: This is going on a little longer than I expected, otherwise I would have arranged sandwiches for us. Have you got time to continue a little bit? I've got another appointment at 2 o'clock. I don't know whether you want to continue...

[Tape stopped while sandwiches are arranged.]

Jabulani Sithole: Okay! Yes we were still on the issue of what are the sort of processes leading to your suspension in the late '70s.

Rob Petersen: Even though the old South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) was defunct, totally defunct, we decided [in London], as a means of opening up contacts, to give assistance to a plan which was hatched by a few people from the history of SACTU, and I think probably by the Communist Party as well, to try to revive SACTU and have a little newspaper which would circulate. This was in London in '77, I think. There was an old trade unionist called John Gaetsewe, [the last elected general secretary of SACTU,] whose flat in Chalk Farm was used as a SACTU office. [Others involved were Phyllis] Altman, [at that time with] the International Defence and Aid Fund [, an independent minded person of social-

democratic views, with a strong trade union background]; Ronnie Press (Communist Party); Gill Marcus (Communist Party); [Solly Smith (Communist Party); at one stage Eli Weinberg (Communist Party)]; and of course Paula.

Paula went to work as a secretary with John Gaetsewe and I ended up — I can't remember how — being appointed the editor of this [new] newspaper [to be] called *Workers' Unity*. [SACTU had once had a newspaper in South Africa called *Workers' Unity*.] Apart from [Phyllis] Altman, John Gaetsewe, Paula [and myself], the editorial board consisted of what I would describe — technically, not as an insult — as Stalinists. Quite astute Stalinists.

. [Zola Zembe, who lived in Manchester, and who was a member of the SACTU executive, would also attend editorial meetings when he could. Later on he got a flat in London and played a greater role in the SACTU office. He had been an MK commander, but had got into trouble with the leadership over something which I never found out, and was sent to East Germany. He then 'escaped' to the UK where he married a member of the British CP. Although personally very critical of the hierarchy in exile, and often supportive of views on the workers' struggle advanced by Paula and myself, his own history and connections with the Communist Party made him unwilling to challenge the leadership politically. He considered that we were foolish in not simply lying low.]

Well, how were we going to develop this newspaper, *Workers' Unity*, to put forward a workers' line [within the framework of Congress]? There we were [several comrades] who used to meet with Paula and myself, and prepare material. [Martin was one; David Hemson another, after he came to the UK; and so was Peter Collins (who, among other things, got himself trained as a printer by the *Militant*). There were one or two others from time to time. We called this group, innocuously, the 'production committee', and disclosed its existence as a volunteer body helping with the production of the paper.⁷] We used to prepare material; meet [to discuss and refine it very carefully]; then Paula and I would take this material to the editorial board where it would be scrutinised and passed, [usually with very little

⁷ [The 'production committee' later evolved into an official SACTU committee in London, called the 'Technical Sub-Committee', with responsibility also for organising SACTU speakers. This committee was to be closed down by the leadership in the course of the conflict which I am about to describe.]

changed. Hardly anybody else wrote anything.] This continued for quite some time.⁸

Then, I think, some of the political heavyweights [in exile] started to smell that there was something emerging here [by way of an implicit, sustained working class political line], which wasn't quite according to the accepted norms. And this occurred particularly when we helped John Gaetsewe to produce a pamphlet, which we later called the 'Green Pamphlet', entitled *Looking Forward*. I see that *Looking Forward* popped up in the press recently when there was a clash between COSATU leaders and the ANC [leadership]. *Looking Forward* was mentioned [on the COSATU side] as a previous example, a previous occasion, when Congress had permitted material like this to be published. However, [as I shall explain,] that's not entirely true.

It [is true that *Looking Forward*] was produced [officially] as a statement of SACTU's perspective on the struggle, [following its unanimous adoption by the SACTU executive committee at a meeting in Yugoslavia, I think in 1978. Paula and I had been asked by John Gaetsewe to help prepare a written perspective on the workers' struggle and, with the help of Martin and others we did so. Paula and I were not members of the SACTU executive committee, and did not attend. I remember that Ronnie Press brought me back a very nice pair of warm leather gloves from that trip, to help with the British winters!]

[John Gaetsewe presented the draft document to the meeting; it was considered and] was 100% approved — except that Eli Weinberg wanted a few changes made in one paragraph, which were made. When this [document] came back and had been printed [as a pamphlet with a green cover], I think it was Brian Bunting and Rusty Bernstein [, both leaders of the Communist Party, who] took one look at it and said, "No way!" So it got locked-up in a cupboard and was never allowed to be distributed. I'll try and find one for you.

Jabulani Sithole: I would appreciate it.

Rob Petersen: And then they started to close us down. By the way, we had developed at the same time an apparatus for sending *Workers' Unity* into South Africa, to the unions, and later on we used the same techniques to send *Inqaba yaBasebenzi* into South Africa.

Jabulani Sithole: Let me interrupt you a little. Why would Brian Bunting and Rusty Bernstein be the ones determining that they [the *Looking Forward* pamphlets] shouldn't go out, whereas the other bigwigs, if you like, in SACTU had not been able or had not actually decided? What were the sort of finer differences between them?

Rob Petersen: That's going to take us into a discussion about the role actually played by the Communist Party leadership, which is quite a wide ranging discussion. But it's a crucial question, with respect, that you ask. The short answer to it is that the most highly trained of the Communist Party leaders were the most acutely sensitive to the 'dangerous' tendency that could arise if people could independently put forward a working class position, not controlled by the Communist Party, and which could disrupt this careful balance which was being maintained in the apparatus between Communist Party influence and the position of 'national liberation', if you like, as articulated in the traditional ANC program. So actually our experience was that the Communist Party was the most consciously prepared and deliberate in preventing an independent working class position being asserted within Congress at that time. I don't know what the position is now.

Jabulani Sithole: And the people who were quite eloquent in this regard were your Brian Bunting and Rusty Bernstein and perhaps [indistinct]...

Rob Petersen: Highly trained, highly trained and sophisticated people. And Joe Slovo himself — although at a certain point he wrote an article which caused quite a stir — ... they would have consulted him. I've no doubt that it [the suppression of *Looking Forward*] was orchestrated by the Communist Party — as was our suspension and expulsion [from the ANC] in due course. Orchestrated not by non-communist ANC leaders, but by the Communist Party leaders in the ANC.

Jabulani Sithole: So you said, then, they started closing you down. In finer details what does that mean?

Rob Petersen: There are many ways of doing these things. The first thing that needed to happen was, they needed to get rid of me as the editor of *Workers' Unity*. [For this purpose] they came with a black empowerment position.

⁸ [*Workers' Unity* began to attract attention within the workers' organisations at home, and also among some leading left-leaning academics from South Africa who regarded the rising movement of the working-class as a vital new development. We began to have discussions with a number of people of this kind, both from among those working abroad and others visiting from South Africa.]

[*Laughter.*] I don't know that they had a candidate, but anyway [it was clear what they were preparing to do]. My recollection is that we came to the conclusion that they were quite determined to close us down. Now, were we going to disappear without a trace?

Martin, you had actually joined the ANC long before I did, hadn't you?

Martin Legassick: Well, I was sort of associated with the ANC from the early 1960s. But the ANC in Britain only started really holding meetings after Soweto [1976], and I started going to those meetings.

Rob Petersen: By the way, just to give you a parallel, at one time [the leadership] closed down the ANC youth meetings in London, which used to take place on a Saturday afternoon, because there developed an overwhelming majority among the young people that they wanted proper political debate. They didn't just want political heavy-weights giving them the line, they wanted to debate things. They [the leadership] actually closed down those meetings and refused to have them continue, [in order] to prevent debate. It is not as though anybody was putting forward a really risky position. There was no democracy whatsoever. Yes, you could argue and disagree on details within a framework which was very plainly laid down. That's the sort of discussion you would have in a committee, but you could not discuss political issues properly.

Jabulani Sithole: It sounds quite familiar — you tow the line, or in Zulu they would say '*u ibambile iline*', so meaning in other words you are within that framework. Now it never occurred to me that that was a very strong statement, but it actually went through the '80s, well into the early '90s, and I think is still around. People would actually listen to you and say, "Is he within the line or outside the line?" — in other words a very fixed framework within which you could actually discuss things. Anything that begins to rock the boat is seen as being subversive in a way.

Rob Petersen: So we produced a [position paper for discussion in SACTU and more widely, which we later printed as] a pamphlet. [Because it didn't have a printed cover, we called it 'the White Pamphlet'. The document was entitled, "*SACTU, the workers' movement, and the ANC*". It was intended to delineate our ideas so that, as we were being closed down bureaucratically, it would be seen and understood that in fact serious political issues lay at the root of it. We were not prepared to vanish without a trace. This was in 1979.]

[Later, after our suspensions, we brought the pamphlet out in an expanded form with a red cover — we called this one 'the Red Pamphlet' — with the title extended to include the words "*a struggle for Marxist policies*". This was the first time we openly used the word 'Marxist' in the process — and we did so deliberately in order to crystallise the discussion, and to force to the forefront of people's minds in South Africa the question of the role that was being played by the Communist Party in stifling the expression of ideas which were in no way at odds with the ideas and aspirations of the workers' movement at home. But I anticipate...]

The SACTU executive were going off to their [annual] meeting, [this time] in Dar es Salaam. There was some talk, [I think from John Gaetsewe and Phyllis Altman,] about inviting me to that meeting [to participate in the discussion of SACTU's role and future]. But as I had a South African passport, it was necessary to organise a visa from the Tanzanian government. I have no doubt that it was contrived that I was refused a visa. [I was not to be present at the meeting at which the decision would be made to remove me as editor.] So we sent our document [to speak for itself]. It had not been printed at that stage; it was in typescript. [I believe the critical views which it set out — all political and in no way personal criticisms — were very constructively, mildly and diplomatically stated. But we knew that the very fact of stating these views would not be tolerated.]

We sent this document with Zola Zembe, wrapped up as a parcel, and he delivered it to the [participants in the SACTU executive] meeting [before the meeting], and they sat around reading it, and he [later] described very vividly what the reactions were. [One of them, I think Ronnie Press, apparently threw it to the ground, denouncing it as "a piece of shit"! The meeting — against (so I was told) the expressed opposition of John Gaetsewe, with a couple of others remaining silent — decided to remove me as editor, those involved saying later that this was because I was "putting forward policies which were not the policies of SACTU". However no-one, when challenged, was willing to define what this meant.]

After that, it all went in the direction of suspension [from the ANC].

[The document, and the reaction to it, had the effect that at least my removal as editor of *Workers' Unity* could be explained by us in its true political context. As rumour spread, and interest grew,] we printed and circulated the document as a pamphlet, [both to SACTU

supporters abroad and to the workers' movement in South Africa]. That was actually [one of] the grounds [given] for our suspension from the ANC [— the suspension of Paula Ensor, Martin Legassick, David Hemson and myself].

We were said to have broken disciplinary rules by circulating this document publicly. We wanted to show, [particularly back in South Africa], that there was now a divergence of line occurring and [enable] people to take up a position on that. So the response to that was that we were suspended.

[How should the political differences between ourselves and the ANC/SACP leaders be summed up?] The essential basis for the [divergence] was that we were putting forward a position of workers' power. [The leadership] would also have been well aware by this stage that we didn't go along with the regimes in the Soviet Union and East Europe, and that we didn't like the fact that the ANC had made itself dependent on these Stalinist regimes. Furthermore, our position on workers' power contained within it a criticism which became more explicit as time went by — [a criticism] of the strategy of so-called ['armed struggle' or] guerrilla warfare for overthrowing the South African regime.

[Pause while tape is turned.]

Our position was essentially that the setting of bombs does not empower the masses. There is a potentially overwhelmingly powerful mass movement that can be developed, organised and armed. Let's make it clear, we are not pacifists: it was a question of [preparing] armed insurrection as far as we were concerned. Their position [on this], which was consistent with everything else [that they put forward], was: now you conduct some guerrilla activities, set off some explosions to get popularity, and then you use that to put pressure for a negotiated settlement. You don't actually arouse the masses to take the power themselves. That was the fundamental difference. So [you can see that] we were not suspended [in 1979] and later expelled [in 1985] over minor doctrinal differences. This was fundamental. Whether we were right or not is another matter, but it was a fundamental divergence of strategy that contained within it the question of which class is going to end up with power at the end of the process.

And then I would say there was a further issue, but it only came to the fore around the time that we were suspended. [The ANC leadership] were having talks with Buthelezi. We made it clear that we were opposed to the ANC associating itself with Inkatha. I recall a

press report — a press cutting from the Rand Daily Mail, I think — where Buthelezi was speaking on a public platform with Harry Oppenheimer, and the reporter reported his speech saying that “these four whites, Martin Legassick, David Hemson, Paula Ensor and Robert Petersen, are the leaders of an international communist conspiracy against me!” That's what Buthelezi said. [Laughter.]

Jabulani Sithole: So he preferred the other communists, not these four communists?

Rob Petersen: Well anyway, that's politics. So that was the context in which we got suspended. [But suspension did not deter us; we did not allow it to be effective in stifling us. The same applied when our suspension was turned (without any hearing) into a formal expulsion in 1985.] We proceeded to develop our own public organ, [the journal] *Inqaba yaBasebenzi* and later on [the paper] *Congress Militant*, to put forward a different position [from that of the ANC leadership], but with identification with this banner of the revolution which, [for the reasons] Ted had explained to us, we regarded as essential to maintain.⁹

[Over the years in exile I must have had discussions personally in London, and on visits to neighbouring Southern African countries, with at least three hundred individuals who were temporarily abroad and were returning home.]

Wherever we were able to recruit people we encouraged them to participate fully inside the ANC, inside the UDF, inside the trade unions, [as well as the Congress youth and community organisations], not to split people away, but on the contrary to [build them and] organise a basis of support [within those organisations] for similar ideas.¹⁰

⁹ [We also produced education material directly for use within unions in South Africa, Zimbabwe and elsewhere, under the name of the Southern African Labour Education Project (SALEP). SALEP speakers addressed labour movement meetings in Britain and elsewhere, encouraging direct links of solidarity especially with the workers' movement at home. Among those active in this were Nimrod Sejake and the late George Peake, as well as several of our British comrades who worked with us full time. Only a general outline has been given here, without identifying a number of comrades who for many years worked tirelessly with us in these tasks. The omission of their names should not be taken as an indication that their role was anything less than vital.]

¹⁰ [Once again, this interview does not deal either with the areas in which our political work at home

Jabulani Sithole: Do you have a recollection of what the reaction was on the part of the leadership that you had explicitly said you were not in favour or could not support the association with Buthelezi around this time?

Rob Petersen: No, I don't recall any discussion [within the ANC] in which that was articulated, which is why I think that it actually only came to the surface around the time that we were being suspended, and we introduced it into our material as another way of defining our position.

Jabulani Sithole: When you were working on *Workers' Unity* the objective was to send material inside the country. The presumption there is that there were networks with structures inside the country. Now, if I pursue this quite carefully, you said earlier on there was no ANC presence and one would assume no SACTU presence. So the one question I have ...

Rob Petersen: You're seeing a contradiction?

Jabulani Sithole: Yes.

Rob Petersen: No, it would not be correct to say that there were [ANC or SACTU] networks [to which the publication could be supplied]. What was being done was that this publication was being injected into the networks which had been created in the way of trade union organisation, and from which could then come political organisation. I can't deny that there would have been some cadres, Congress cadres, operating in certain parts of the country, but it wasn't as though there was a distribution network. We had to develop that by introducing this material, including SACTU's *Workers' Unity*, into channels which we knew about. They were not given to us. We opened up those channels.

Jabulani Sithole: So you had to actually have a mailing list yourself and identify cadres from experience in the early '70s? The impression

was concentrated, or the many individual comrades who engaged in it courageously, especially from the mid-'80s through to the early '90s, with varying degrees of success. To do justice to them would require an extensive history of its own. I can do no more than single out here, in addition to names already mentioned, comrades such as Zackie Achmat, Victor Mhlongo, Weizmann Hamilton, Leon Kaplan, Margie Struthers, Mark Heywood, Sharon Ekambaram, 'Dopla' Cuphe, Laddie Bosch, Shafika Isaacs, Deena Bosch, Terens Crow, Noor Nieftagodien, Josey Abrahams, Vernon Rossouw, Bob Wylie and Norma and Pat Craven. Of these, all but Victor and Vernon (who are sadly deceased) could have a valuable contribution to make now to a history of our struggle.]

that I have in mind is that there had been some co-ordination between the Western Cape, Joburg and Natal, as you pointed out earlier, where trade unions had been revived, and you had to actually use those sorts of networks rather than [political] networks that were [already] in place.

Rob Petersen: Yes. We had relatively few points of contact, but if the material was good enough then it would be reproduced and further distributed spontaneously.

Jabulani Sithole: As was the case with *Inqaba yaBasebenzi*, because it got reproduced like that. The other point is, what were the perceptions of the SACTU leaders, around this time when you were working in the *Workers' Unity*, about developments in the '70s, say from '73 to '79? Here was the formation of FOSATU — there is this process leading up to the formation of FOSATU in '79 — then you are looking at these developments from abroad in London. What were the sort of views or the nature of these trade unions, the relationship between the internal-based trade unions and the South African Congress of Trade Unions?

Rob Petersen: My recollection is that the ANC, Communist Party and SACTU leaders that we encountered, while they could not speak against the independent trade unions that had been formed in their absence, were in fact quite hostile to them. So much so that, in the mid '80s when the National Union of Mineworkers sought support from the British National Union of Mineworkers, they were denounced as a "yellow union" and we had to organise a campaign with our British comrades in the *Militant* to turn that position around in the British NUM. Now why — with the Anti-Apartheid Movement, with the ANC being as strong as it was [in the UK], with diplomatic links and official links with the international trade union movement — was it necessary [for us to have to do this]?

Jabulani Sithole: To suggest that they were "yellow unions", was [this because] they were linked to the ICFTU, as opposed to the other one [WFTU]? Was that the gist of what they were trying to say?

Rob Petersen: Well, what they actually argued — this came from some South Africans but you heard an echo of it through these British trade unionists — was that you can't do anything in South Africa, the oppression is too great; therefore anything which is tolerated is only tolerated because it's collaboration. You won't believe it, but it was as crude as that.

Martin Legassick: It wasn't simply to do with saying "yellow" because ICFTU. The phrase

“yellow unions” actually goes back to the 1930s. It was used by Communist Parties to denounce unions in fascist countries, to say that they must be collaborationist.

Jabulani Sithole: Yes, yes. It sounds quite familiar as well. When organisation began on the north of uThugela in Natal — actually in so-called KwaZulu *per se*, outside Natal — in the urban areas, when a number of comrades began to organise and interestingly the youth in the '80s were working with trade unions as well. It seems to be there is a twin thing, you have your workers and your youth in all its areas. I remember one person that I have interviewed saying that he went to the UDF offices in Durban, and he was asked the question: “How do you guys organise in KwaZulu, how do you organise in Mpangeni, how is it possible?” And the impression that he got was that these guys were saying, no, we are being allowed to organise probably because the Inkatha thinks we are safe. Whereas those youths had actually identified ways of organising and they were running the risk of being killed. They would give an account of detailed experiences of how some of them got almost killed. Then later on of course they were going to be killed from '87-'88 on. It seems to be a general trend, but I'm amazed it was coming from outside as well.

Rob Petersen: The problem with being in exile is that you have no rank and file that you can appeal to, so the politics is all conducted in committees or among people who themselves have no real connection with back home. And it's basically not fruitful. So whether we would have any success eventually with the point of view we were putting forward was going to depend upon how the situation opened up at home.

Jabulani Sithole: At home, yes.

Rob Petersen: And I'm far from thinking that what we were doing in exile was important in exile politics. If it has any importance, it's only because maybe it represented something historical and also something with a future once the movement got fully to grips with its tasks in the country. But as I said earlier on, that isn't in fact the way in which the situation unfolded. The situation unfolded towards — although it was never a certainty — it unfolded towards the bringing off of a negotiated settlement. And frankly I think it is much better that the struggle for socialism is carried forward in due course from that basis rather than from the basis of the ashes which we would have been left with if there had been a civil war. I think Mandela managed the process of transition absolutely brilliantly.

Jabulani Sithole: One question that I wanted to put as well is, how would you re-gauge your presence — how successful was it? Through say *Inqaba*, through recruitments in the 1980s? You [had] moved out of [South Africa in 1976] as you said earlier on. You then identified that you needed to contest the developments politically inside the country in the 1980s. So in your recollections, how successful were those efforts?

Rob Petersen: I think that's a question I would like to think over before I answer. Are you going to do a transcript of [this interview] so I don't need to write these things down?

Jabulani Sithole: There will be a transcript. [This] is the very last question. You came back [to South Africa] in [May] 1990. You indicated to me that [despite being suspended since 1979 and expelled since 1985] you — and it seems to me you have actually done it on [several] occasions — will drive a long way to vote for the ANC.

Rob Petersen: Well the last time I did it was for the municipal elections, when I drove sixty kilometres to vote for the ANC.

Jabulani Sithole: The question that I wanted to ask is, if you reflect very carefully now, why do you do that? What statement is there? Is it in keeping with the earlier analysis that you were making here, that it is an area that has got to be contested and I think you even indicated that you are debating it among yourselves, and that you [and Martin] disagreed.

Rob Petersen: Well, I've not debated it [for some years]. I may be presuming [as to what Martin's position is]. This again needs careful formulation, and so I may come back to this. We don't yet have, if you like, a normal democratic politics in this country: we're a way from that yet. The gulf of rich and poor is enormous. The political life that is conducted in the newspapers and so forth hardly goes on at all among the real masses of people. You have very basic allegiances. There is a basic struggle to make ends meet and get the next meal. The ANC remains absolutely vital to the whole political integument of South Africa. If the ANC didn't exist now, what would we have politically? Well perhaps the unions would have to step into the gap. In the end, the unions are the most fundamental guarantee of a civilised life in this country — even though they, for quite understandable reasons, have lost their way. And I wouldn't presume to tell them what a better way is — it's a really difficult question. But the survival of the unions — that industrial organisation, that urban organisation, and that conduct of discussion and decision-making that goes on — rational discussion and

decision-making [involving tens and hundreds of thousands of people] — is a fundamental pillar of the continuation of civilised life here.

Nevertheless the political integument as constituted by the ANC remains at this time in my view absolutely vital, and I would proceed very very carefully in the area of steps towards bringing that to a split. I am certainly in no hurry in that regard. You must first have a rational program, you must have cadres, you must know exactly what you're trying to do, you must be leading somewhere. My own view is that, at the present time, on the national plane, there is no macro-economic policy to the left of the ANC which is sustainable. Now as long as there isn't a serious sustainable macro-economic policy to the left of the ANC ... — there are many things that could be done differently, but in my view in macro-economic terms there isn't any space to the left of the ANC. At the present time and under those circumstances I don't think we are anywhere near a situation where it's appropriate to move towards a split [on class lines]. It doesn't mean that I am in any way opposed to organising vigorous campaigns, political tendencies, you name it. But that very tradition [of Congress], which was taken hold of by the people when they raised themselves to their feet and [in a sense] took over South Africa, that very tradition continues now to provide a framework of political discipline which I don't resent.

Jabulani Sithole: The sort of question which, I mean, I don't expect an answer to is: whether that wouldn't actually move along the same lines that you have had in Zimbabwe. I mean there is always a question mark, that, when you take the tradition and the discipline imposed, once you actually get your freedom and your independence (in the case of Zimbabwe), whether that is actually being utilised to the benefit of the majority or it's being utilised to the benefit of the emerging bourgeoisie. The initial stages would actually prop up the black bourgeoisie, the African bourgeoisie, while they joined ranks [with the established bourgeoisie]. The question is whether we aren't actually heading in the same direction in this country. It's a very difficult question to answer at this point.

Rob Petersen: For what it's worth, I would suggest a brief answer to that. I think it makes a huge difference that the urban working-class forces of opposition to that development are *inside* the ANC, not *outside*. It's very important. Plus it's a much more developed situation [here]: the urban population is overwhelming in social weight, whereas in Zimbabwe it's very much balanced. I think the rural areas are still, [in fact,] predominant in

Zimbabwe. So while the danger that you raise is, I think, something that has to be kept constantly in front of us, I don't think a parallel with Zimbabwe should be easily drawn.

Jabulani Sithole: Thank you. I would want to pursue other issues, although I'm mindful of the time. I would want to pursue other issues, but for the initial stage I think it would be important [first] for the two tapes [to be transcribed]. I will be dying to see the transcript myself. I must say we are so grateful. In the little that you said that you wanted to give us, I think it was volumes. It was quite rich and I would want to pursue this and we are foreseeing another interview, if that is possible, based on what you elaborate and what you see from the transcript as well.

Rob Petersen: Well thank you so much. I appreciate all of you taking the time and interest to pursue this with me. It's very gratifying. Thank you.
