

Comrade Moss: valuable, but where's the politics?

Karl von Holdt reviews *Comrade Moss*, a book by Labour and Community Resources Project (LACOM) (Learn and Teach Publications, Johannesburg, 1989)

It is difficult to write a biography of someone who is still alive. It is even more difficult when the biography is part of a campaign for the release of the person whose story it tells. Does one read *Comrade Moss* as a powerful piece of campaign propaganda, or as a semi-official story of the life of a union leader and his organisation, or as a serious "attempt to explain broader developments in working class organisation"?

Comrade Moss tries to be all these things. It is a very readable and lively story of the life of Moses Mayekiso, one of South Africa's most widely-known and respected working class leaders. It tells how Mayekiso grew up in Transkei, how he worked on the mines, and then deserted and went to Jo'burg, looking for a job. It tells how he joined MAWU and became a shopsteward. After being dismissed in a strike in 1979, Mayekiso was employed as a union organiser.

"His shoes were finished"

The book describes how Mayekiso worked day-and-night on the East Rand organising the metal factories. "Moss worked very hard - I don't think even a soldier could work hard like him... Moss was the only one the workers wanted. So he was walking everywhere, even his shoes, his heels, they were finished from all the walking."

Because of his leadership qualities, Mayekiso was elected branch secretary of MAWU, and later

while he was in prison, general secretary of the giant new metal union, NUMSA. The book therefore also tells the history of MAWU in the Transvaal. It does this quite deliberately, quoting the experiences of other workers and organisers besides Mayekiso. It describes the slow patient process of organising factories in the 70s, the East Rand strike waves in the early 80s, the birth of the Wadville shopsteward council, the entry into the Industrial Council in 1983, and the split in the Transvaal branch of the union in 1984.

The book then goes on to tell the fascinating story of how Mayekiso, union members and youth activists together organised the system of yard, block and street committees in Alexandra in 1986. It was this work that got



Graphic from the cover of *Comrade Moss*

the 'Alex Five' detained and put on trial for treason. *Comrade Moss* was written as part of the campaign to free the 'Five'. Ironically, they were acquitted on all charges before the book was finished - their triumphant return home forms its conclusion!

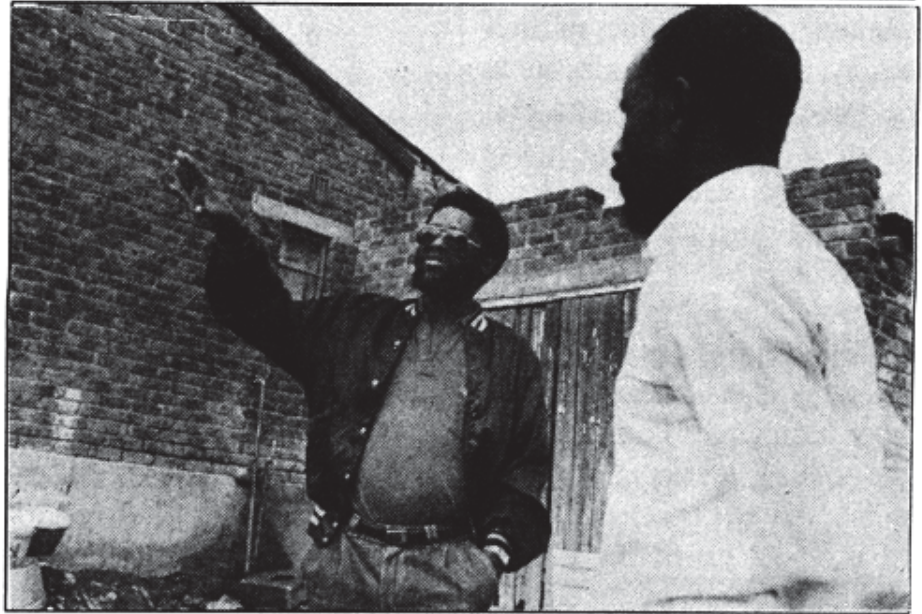
Powerful sense of history

The strength of *Comrade Moss* is its very powerful sense of recent working class history on the Witwatersrand. This is achieved by weaving together the voices and experiences of different workers and residents around the central story of Mayekiso. The book constantly points out that Mayekiso's life is not unique, that it is one with the experiences of hundreds of thousands of workers.

It gives a very strong impression of how powerless workers were before the unions of the mid-seventies started organising. Wages were low, treatment was bad, workers were dismissed at will. It tells of the new hope brought by the unions, and of the protracted battles to establish union organisation and win workers' rights. *Comrade Moss* will give worker readers access to this history, and pride in their struggles, their organisations, and their leaders.

Where are the political conflicts?

But *Comrade Moss* also has weaknesses as working class history. Partly this springs from the book's role in the Free Mayekiso campaign. It gives an idealised and uncontroversial picture of Mayekiso and his union,



Moss Mayekiso in Alex - a unionist rooted in the community

Photo: Cedric Nunn/Afrapix

MAWU. This is perhaps most noticeable in the reference to the bitter division in the Transvaal branch. The immediate cause of the split in 1984 was the dismissal of the general secretary for corruption. However, underlying this were sharp political differences, which reflected wider political tensions within FOSATU, and between FOSATU and the UDF. *Comrade Moss* refers to these political debates and tensions only in passing.

Likewise, while *Comrade Moss* describes how Mayekiso "began to argue quite forcefully for a change in policy towards greater involvement in community politics", it does not reflect the heated debates and struggles that preceded and followed the formation of COSATU. Everyone agreed on the need to take up "community issues" - but what did this mean in practice? Did it mean supporting UDF-affiliated civics, links with the ANC, or union locals taking up community issues on their own?

In fact, there is very little ref-

erence to national political organisations, such as the UDF, ANC, or SACP, either in the text or in the interview with Mayekiso at the end of the book. Attitudes to these organisations were, however, central to the debates in the union movement over political strategies and alliances.

Mayekiso was an influential participant in these debates, but the book does not help us to understand them. In fact, it prevents understanding: according to the writers, when Mayekiso spoke "it was the voice of the workers that spoke" (p 96). Does this mean that leaders with different views did not speak with the voice of workers? In reality, workers have different political views, and the book does not recognise that.

It may be that these omissions were inevitable in a book written for a campaign, a book that would necessarily be a 'semi-official' history of the organisation of which Mayekiso is the leader. But it makes for a somewhat superficial and bland account, and one which is not likely to deepen

workers' understanding of their history. If popular histories are to be truly "democratic" and empower the working class, surely they have to deal openly with debates and struggles over strategy and ideology?

Political perspective

There is also a sense that the book hasn't quite kept pace with the political developments in the union movement. In its selections, in the questions it asks, in its silences, it reflects the old FOSATU perspective that placed almost exclusive emphasis on shopfloor organisation, distanced itself from the national liberation movement, and was overcautious about alliances.

Since then however there has been a rapid development of a political culture that combines the strengths of the FOSATU tradition with the strengths of the national liberation tradition. Mayekiso is one of the many union leaders who embodies this development and combination of qualities. *Comrade Moss*, however, continues to stress the perspective that was associated with FOSATU.

Problems of worker history

In her preface Coco Cachalia argues that oral history is important because it makes history more "democratic" by relying on "people's own understanding of their lives, rather than on 'expert' knowledge of how to write history." There is a danger in this view. By idealising experience it can simply confirm popular beliefs, rather than developing a critical, scientific analysis. Historical analysis



should go beyond common sense and memory, to reveal the hidden forces that shape our history.

Cachalia also writes that workers should have the opportunity "to control the writing of their own history." This raises a host of questions. Is worker participation the same as control? Does the political perspective that informs the book reflect the views of the writers, the workers, the union, or a complex combination of these? As pointed out above, workers have *different* political views. Which workers should control the writing of history? Furthermore, if a history is 'controlled' can it be a critical history, or will it inevitably be an official version?

These are important questions for all those engaged in social analysis which is linked to organisation.

'Simple democracy'

The book also delivers too simple an organisational message - a message of what one might call 'simple democracy'. It emphasises the importance of patient, solid grassroots organisation and democratic structures. This message is very important. But it does not capture the complex problems faced by massive industrial unions such as NUMSA has grown into. For example, participation in the industrial council has enormously strengthened the power of the union and increased its member-

ship and its ability to mobilise - but it has also contributed to weakening shopfloor structures because the union simply does not have the resources to service every plant. The model of 'simple democracy', which was so crucial to the birth of the new unions, does not help to solve this problem. Nor does *Comrade Moss* help us to understand it.

Leadership and democracy

Despite its weaknesses, this is an important book. Those who have met Mayekiso are immediately impressed by his modesty, his friendliness, and his lack of rhetoric. Through the words of workers in *Comrade Moss*, he emerges as "a fair man" with a deep respect for people, committed to solving workers' problems and involving workers in decisions.

These are valuable leadership qualities, and well worth emphasising. Especially now, when high-profile national politics is growing in importance, it is essential to stress the importance of modesty, accountability and consistent grassroots work.

For the same reason, *Comrade Moss's* emphasis on tight, disciplined grassroots organisation, and on democratic structures and practices, is timely. Precisely because the scale and complexity of union organisation has increased so rapidly, there is a danger of neglecting grassroots structures. This tendency is also encouraged by the rapid political developments in the country. It needs to be balanced by powerful, democratic mass organisation.

Comrade Moss is a book that all activists should read. ☆