

History distorted

Anti-Apartheid Movement and Swedish union solidarity

It is common for the vital contribution of trade unions in ending apartheid to be forgotten these days. **Jonas Sjölander** discusses this trend in Sweden where commentary asserts the importance of exiled liberation movements, global solidarity and internal struggles without mentioning the critical role of unions which were painstakingly built from the 1970s onwards often with the support of international unions such as in Sweden.

Swedish investment in South Africa has occurred since the beginning of the 20th century through such companies as ASEA, SKF, Alfa Laval and Electrolux. Some Swedish companies were established before apartheid was official policy, and some right after the 1960 Sharpeville massacre.

In the 1970s the Swedish metal trade union, Metall, started to develop contacts with emerging black and non-racial unions in South Africa. Local shop stewards in Sweden and South Africa first developed cooperation, but soon contacts emerged with union national headquarters.

The ball bearing multinational SKF set up factories in Uitenhage and Johannesburg in the 1960s. Göran Johansson, a former shop steward at SKF in Gothenburg, described the travelling and direct links between South African and Swedish unionists as a mutual learning process that benefited workers in both countries. This contact continued until the closure of SKF-Uitenhage in 2007, but the relationship between Numsa (National Union of Metal Workers of South Africa) and Metall remains.

At first SKF mainly produced bearings for the South African mining and motor industries. However, lack of investment in new technology and machinery from the 1980s into the new democracy became a major problem. The Swedish government was not willing to exempt SKF from laws that regulated investments in South Africa.

This lack of investment happened when SKF internationally was going through major structural and technological changes. As demands for more advanced bearings grew, especially in the motor industry, it was impossible for SKF-Uitenhage to produce what was needed and orders declined. Bearings had to be imported from SKF-units elsewhere in the world. The problem was so serious that it was hard even for unions to justify not closing SKF-Uitenhage.

PROBLEMS WITH TOTAL DISINVESTMENT

In Sweden there was popular support for disinvestment and sanctions against South Africa during the 1980s. Only the Swedish right-wing party refused to promote sanctions. Some South

African unions were ambiguous, and Metall preferred to support them through direct links rather than unreservedly joining the anti-apartheid international campaign for total disinvestment.

Metall found it hard to accept that SKF was denied small but necessary reinvestments in machinery that would also improve the working conditions of employees in the Uitenhage plant at the end of the 1980s. This was even harder to accept when SKF's giant neighbour, Volkswagen with about 8 000 employees, made a huge direct investment in building a new painting unit. The German investment occurred without protest or discussion, while the proposal for reinvestment in SKF-Uitenhage caused an angry debate in Sweden where Metall was accused of betraying resistance to apartheid.

The consequences of disinvestment and multinational's withdrawal were in some senses hard to align with unionist thinking. The moral agenda of the Anti-Apartheid-Movement (AAM) sometimes conflicted with union realities. Unemployment would follow disinvestment which seriously threatened the livelihoods

of workers and their families. It also meant that the non-racial unions would lose what they had fought so hard for since the 1970s.

The emerging unions had gained power and space to fight apartheid on the ground. They had developed well-organised structures from which to conduct the struggle against apartheid in the workplace and also in communities and more broadly. The support and close relations that had evolved for example between Metall and South African union, Numsa and its forerunners, had great significance for increasing workers' strength at companies like SKF.

Officially and in rhetoric most new unions in South Africa supported the demand for disinvestment which was the policy of the liberation movement and leaders in jail and exile. But in practice unions with members in transnational corporations had a different agenda. It was a difficult balancing act and unions either avoided the question or made different statements depending on who was asking.

The AAM in Sweden emphasised that genuine unions in South Africa wanted foreign corporations, including Swedish ones, to leave immediately. But Metall came to another conclusion based on dialogue with Numsa. Even though Metall supported sanctions to put pressure on the apartheid regime, it could not support a total withdrawal of Swedish firms. Kally Forrest laconically states in her monumental and important thesis on the history of Numsa, that the AAM overseas was not always sensitive to the dilemma that South African unions confronted.

The disinvestment debate was also an asset in union bargaining. Sanctions were used as a tool to restore workers' rights and bypass apartheid laws. But in the Swedish AAM, mainly organised by the Africa Groups in Sweden (Agis) and the Isolate South Africa Campaign (Isak), there was a total lack of

understanding of this disinvestment dilemma for unions.

It was certainly a dilemma for Metall because it faced accusations of walking hand in hand with the right-wing party and capitalist exploiters. However because interests sometimes coincide between capitalists and unions it does not mean that they are common interests. Motives, backgrounds and outcomes can be totally different.

The activists in Agis and Isak asserted their correctness and referred to contacts with the ANC (African National Congress), UDF (United Democratic Front) and unions. The Isak activist Magnus Walan for example stated: '... 1984 when I did this interview with Chris Dlamini, a union leader who was the chair [president] of Fosatu (Federation of South African Trade Unions)... before the launch of Cosatu (Congress of South African Trade Unions) I interviewed him as pro-sanctions. I had an interview with Piroshaw Camay from... Cusa (Council of Unions of South Africa), whose leaders also talked positively about sanctions. Another important union was Saawu (South African Allied Workers Union), Sisa Njikelana, who came out even stronger. Finally, I had an interview with Winnie Mandela. Winnie was very direct and militant... saying: "We don't want your bloody money! We don't have to have golden chains. Our struggle is not about that, we want our freedom. Don't tell us what we should say about sanctions, we can speak for ourselves, the ANC can speak for itself."''

Metall on the other hand had close contacts with organised workers on the shop floor at Swedish corporations in South Africa. Metall emphasised that disinvestment hit workers hard and it wanted to support unions instead. The lost strike at General Motors (GM) in Port Elizabeth and its sale to a South African owner in 1986 was

an example of the social costs that resulted from the total disinvestment strategy. The vice president of Cosatu, Dlamini, who Walan defined as 'pro-sanction' commented in a BBC interview on the sale of GM, 'Cosatu supported sanctions yet had never called for firms to get out of South Africa'.

Camay, quoted by Walan, stated in another interview in *Izwelethu* that: 'Apartheid is a crime against humanity. Under these circumstances we would consider calling for total sanctions but we don't think this will work... What we are demanding of companies is that they get involved in pressurizing the government into fundamental change.'

Both Isak and Metall found arguments and sources in South Africa that supported their positions. The tension was so bad that Isak once demonstrated outside the Metall head office in Stockholm. Metall was accused of being disloyal and not taking a stand against apartheid. Bengt Jakobsson, international secretary of Metall and perhaps the main target of the critique, was however 20 years later honoured by a 2009 Cosatu Congress with an award for his work in the struggle against apartheid.

Jakobsson travelled a lot in South Africa between 1970 and 1990 and played an important role in forging relations with emerging unions, and in formulating Metall policies on Swedish corporations in South Africa.

INTERNAL COMMENTARY NOT NOTICED

Much has been said and published about the Swedish AAM and its significance for the struggle against apartheid. It is remarkable, though, that the rich research on labour done in South Africa has not been noticed to any extent in Sweden.

After spending weeks in the library at Rhodes University I realised that the South African perspective brought new light to the Swedish discussions. An impression that

remains with me is that South African historians and sociologists stress that the unions before the formation of Cosatu played a significant role in the process that ended apartheid. The unions and workers in transnational corporations played a crucial role. The workers at, for example, SKF had established a non-racial democratic union with bargaining rights by the end of the 1970s.

In order to understand the fall of apartheid in the 1990s the Swedish academic and political establishment usually mention the struggle of the liberation movement, pressure from overseas especially sanctions and the activism of the AAM across the world, and the mass-mobilisation inside South Africa during the second half of the 1980s. But Swedish scholars, for example, Håkan Thörn, seldom mention the formation of the labour movement before 1985. South Africans, and some international researchers, however, stress the formation of the union movement as an important component in the struggle against apartheid.

The union movement avoided being a target of repression and used the space and contradictions inside the system to fight it. The organisational structures and skills that were developed within this movement from 1973 to 1985 were invaluable in the struggle after 1985. The rapid movement towards the collapse of apartheid would not have been possible without the formation and struggles of unions before 1985.

Already in 1984 the authors of *Power! Black workers and the struggle for freedom in South Africa* who addressed readers in Great Britain noticed the lack of acknowledgement of publications from inside South Africa. Their remark is equally valid for Swedish or Scandinavian literature on South Africa and the apartheid system.

Swedish opinions on apartheid were mainly based on the perspectives of the banned exile



Daniel Dube was surprised by questions asked by Isak activists when he visited Sweden.

organisations, while organisations like Fosatu were not given much attention. South African research brings new perspectives however. It places discussions of the relations between the AAM and the labour movement in Sweden in another light. The union movement in South Africa, supported by unions elsewhere, must be regarded as an important element in the fight against apartheid.

Important events and organisations are nothing more than parentheses in the Swedish debate. Images of the South African struggle made a strong impression in Sweden and the heroism of the liberation movement overshadowed the everyday struggles in workplaces and the building of strong unions controlled by members.

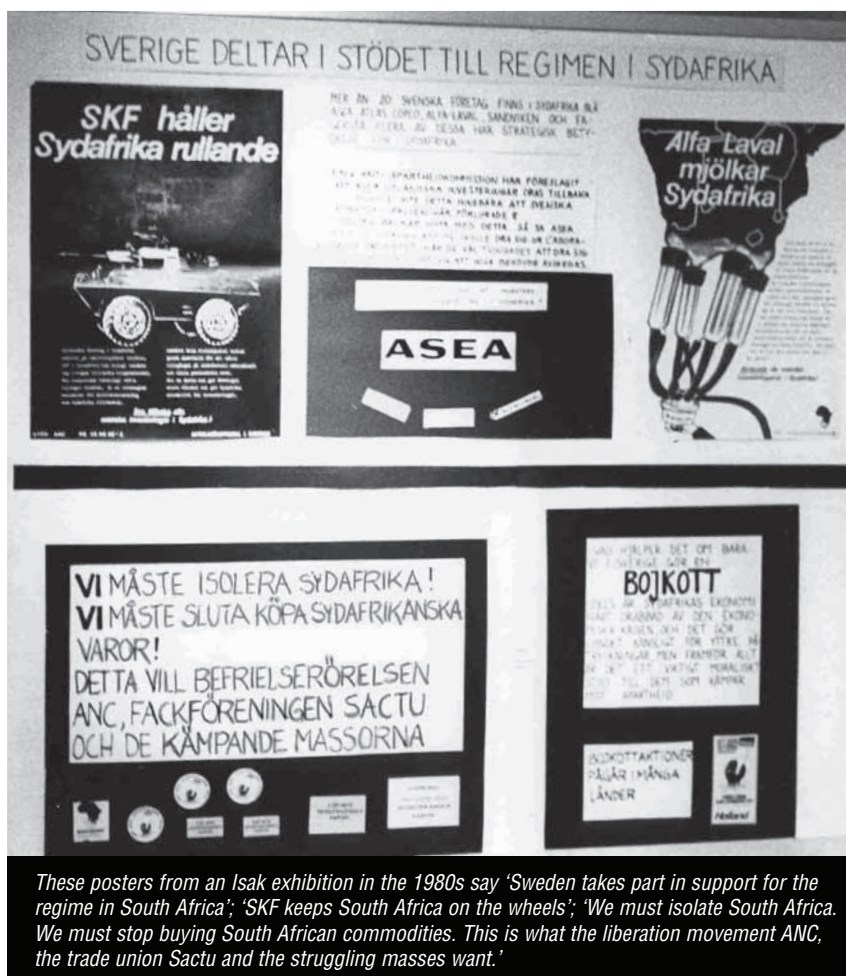
Daniel Dube, a shop steward in the National Automobile and Allied Workers Union (Naawu) at SKF in Uitenhage, and later Numsa president, was surprised by the questions asked by Isak activists when he first visited Gothenburg in 1985: 'Are you a member of the ANC? Do you support the demand to pull SKF out of South Africa?' Dube knew the danger of security police interrogation and knew he could not openly declare support for the banned ANC. He was asked sensitive questions by people on

another continent who knew little of the nature of the apartheid system which oppressed him.

He visited Sweden with its democratic traditions and the highest union membership in the world. Nevertheless, he met hostility when he explained that he did not have a mandate from members at SKF-Uitenhage to advocate closure of the factory.

Thörn states in his book on the global AAM that organised global popular opinion was possible because it was constructed as an imagined community of activists. The solidarity with oppressed blacks in South Africa was truly international and it took place at a distance from the apartheid state. He describes the global character of the AAM as starting from South African organisations both inside the country and in exile. He hardly mentions the growth of the new unions from the Durban strikes onwards and the cooperation between Swedish and South African unions.

He focuses instead on the international AAM and especially the Swedish and British movements. The book concludes with a section on the meanings of solidarity. Thörn gives a definition by a leading Swedish anti-apartheid activist, Mai Palmgren, as '... the unconditional support to a group of people fighting for their rights in a faraway



These posters from an Isak exhibition in the 1980s say 'Sweden takes part in support for the regime in South Africa'; 'SKF keeps South Africa on the wheels'; 'We must isolate South Africa. We must stop buying South African commodities. This is what the liberation movement ANC, the trade union Sactu and the struggling masses want.'

place'. The new South African unions experienced just such assistance from the Swedish Metall.

Why did Isak and Agis not support these kinds of direct links? And why do academics in Sweden like Thörn not give it status in the anti-apartheid struggle? His discussion on imagined communities and collective identities in the AAM may explain this: 'However, global anti-apartheid solidarity as any other practice constructing a collective identity, involved drawing a number of borders between "us" and "them". The fundamental Other of the transnational anti-apartheid movement was of course the apartheid regime. In the case of the solidarity movements in Britain and Sweden other important Others where the state, national corporations with subsidiaries in South Africa and their political allies.'

In the collective boundaries between 'us' and 'them', the Swedish AAM activists and parts of the union movement gathered on each side of the fence, even though both were involved in the struggle against apartheid. There was a divide in the approach to sanctions, disinvestment and the isolation strategy.

There were also hard debates and disagreements over attitudes to Sactu (ANC-aligned exiled South African Congress of Trade Unions) in relation to the emerging union movement inside South Africa. Unlike Isak and Agis the Swedish unions were directly associated with unions in South Africa and sometimes had counterparts as with SKF. The AAM was eager to establish 'subject-subject relationships' as well, but in practice relations took a different direction, which Bertil Högberg from Agis

expresses: '... the practice of the solidarity movement was most often constructed in terms of 'subject-object', where the people in South Africa, their organizations became the object of our solidarity.'

CONCLUSION

Much discussion around anti-apartheid strategies and positions has revolved around the difference between the struggle within and outside the borders of South Africa. Thörn believes that the struggle within and outside was united and dependent on each other and both took part in the process that led to the collapse of apartheid.

Thörn does not describe external forces as more important for liberation than internal ones but the formation of Cosatu in 1985 appears as a sudden act of magic as he neglects the formation of the labour movement before 1985. The breakthrough of the new unions occurred inside the country and international assistance came primarily from national and international unions like Metall in Sweden. In Sweden this is a forgotten part of the liberation struggle history.

Instead, the impression remains that some unions, rather than working against racism supported apartheid and wanted to continue to 'invest in apartheid'. This was the interpretation of a Swedish author in a positive review of Thorns' book in Sweden's largest morning paper in June 2010. This is a sad misunderstanding. It is insulting to all unionists who engaged in the struggle against apartheid and it also grossly simplifies history, which paradoxically is a Western, and almost colonial interpretation of what actually took place in South Africa during those years. ¹⁸

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