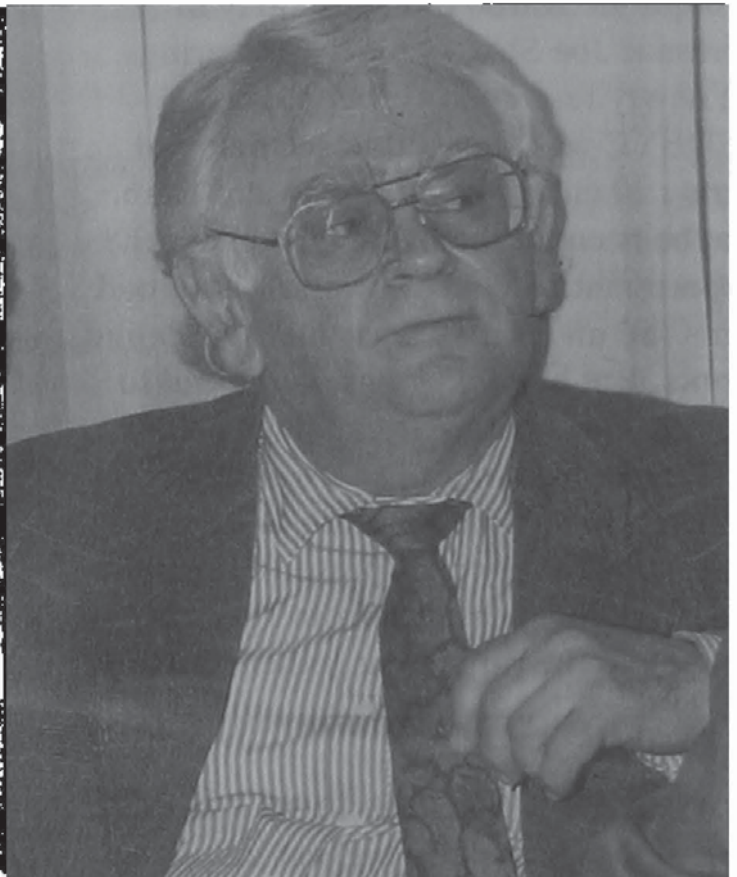
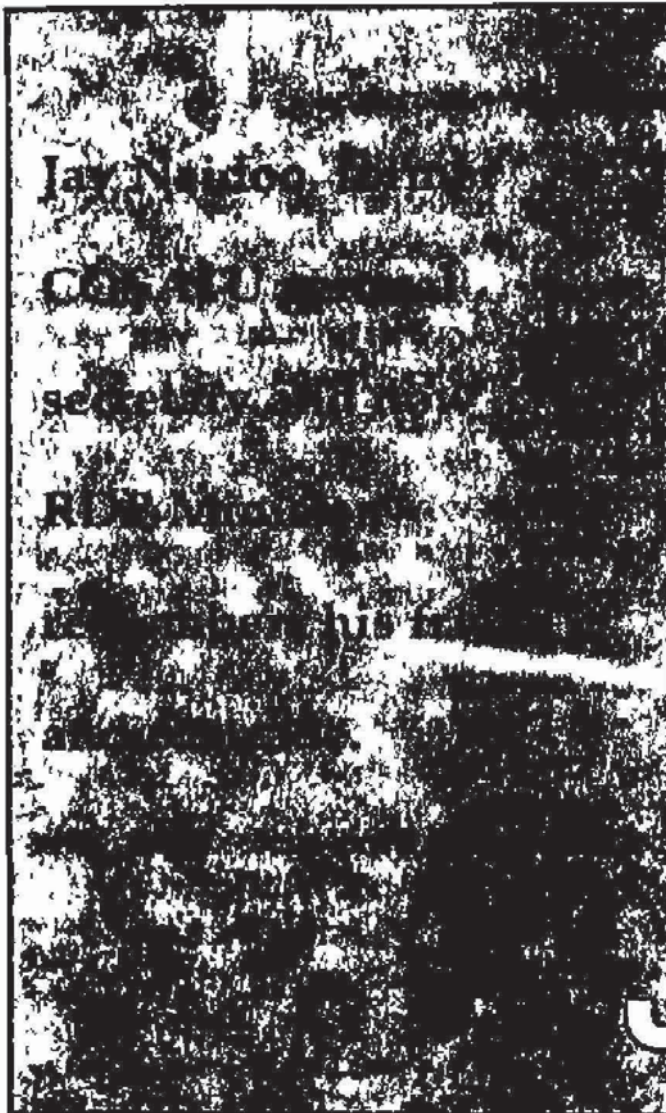


Obituary



Joe Slovo

I FIRST met Comrade Joe Slovo in December 1985. I had just been elected general secretary of COSATU and was attending a World Council of Churches conference. I was struck by his incisiveness and his understanding of the challenges facing the South African labour movement and the working class more broadly.

However, more important to me was that this great revolutionary and thinker was prepared to listen patiently as I outlined events in South Africa. I was intensely aware of this great strength during my entire relationship with this great man. He could sit with ordinary workers and share a whisky and learn from their experiences.

I often think if all politicians and political office bearers, whether in government, trade

unions or political parties could be the same it would concentrate our minds and energies in getting the job done. Power very often alienates political leaders from the people, particularly the poor. Comrade Slovo left us that important legacy of being powerful yet humble.

In the course of my position in COSATU I was privileged at various intervals (when I had a passport) to meet with him. Although COSATU emerged as unified and almost monolithic, there were at times serious differences on certain issues.

On the occasions when we met, I knew I could be completely frank with him. His loyalties were ultimately with workers and the poor.

He had the trust of workers and that trust is

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often very difficult to earn. As a union organiser I learnt that lesson early in life.

One of Slovo's great contributions was to spell out the link between theory and practice. Articles like "Has socialism failed?" would have isolated lesser individuals. But he forced many thousands of activists to confront the reality that socialism cannot succeed where there is no political freedom, where civil society, the mass organs of the people, are just appendages of the political party.

His recognition of the independent role of especially trade unions shaped the role of the tripartite alliance and contributed to the decisive victory in the April election. I remember many times Comrade Slovo being asked at the last minute to join marches of mineworkers or metalworkers — he never hesitated to join and pledge solidarity.

Acknowledging that you are wrong as a leader can often be a painful process. Yet the ultimate strength of an individual is being able to say, "I am wrong and I apologise". Dogmatism kills all spirit of enquiry. It creates regimented, uninspired people who question nothing, follow the book and, in the end, a society stagnates or explodes in disorder. Changing that culture to a more participative democracy is one of the major challenges facing South Africa.

As the Minister of Housing, Comrade Slovo was at the centre of the reconstruction and development drive, but he was clear that the South African government on its own would never deliver the RDP. He was one of the strongest advocates of a partnership between government and stakeholders in civil society.

Housing is one of the central pillars of the RDP, yet one of the most difficult to handle. The housing budget, at 1,5% of the national

budget, is one of the lowest in the world. The construction industry has not been geared to meet the demand for low cost housing. The bankers were very reluctant to give bonds to lower income groups in nearly all black townships. The bond boycott is also continuing.

Comrade Joe masterminded the Botshabelo summit, which brought together in a social pact bankers, civics, government, NGOs, business and unions. He was also a

key person in drawing up and driving the Masakhane campaign, which will be launched by government by the end of February. All organisations — government, business, churches, women and trade unions will be mobilised to ensure 'RDP' delivery on the ground and to make sure that proper preparations are made for the

October municipal elections.

Perhaps not many people realised the humorous side of such a serious thinker as Comrade Joe. I have heard some of the funniest jokes about politics as he on occasion entertained us late into the night. Though a man of few words, he loved a good laugh.

I had not met Comrade Ruth First, but I got to know Comrade Helena very well. She was, I would say, more organised than Comrade Joe and they shared a wonderful partnership. One of the greatest challenges facing political leaders is how to balance one's political responsibility with the need to be a parent, a father or a mother, a husband or a wife. Being in exile for so many years made that a difficult task for both Joe and Helena. Yet one always saw comradeship, love and tenderness in their relationship.

I, alongside millions of other people, even political opponents, will dearly miss Comrade Joe. He was a great patriot, a friend, comrade, a pillar of strength and a decent human being. Hamba Kahle Comrade Joe. ☆

