

TED FRAZER



Ted Frazer (2nd from left, front row) with the executive of the Hotel, Bar and catering Trades Employees Association, 1989.

The trade union movement in Cape Town lost its most stalwart leader last week, with the death of Ted Frazer.

The Grand Old Man of trade unions in Cape Town was born and bred in the East End of London, and retained his Cockney accent after half a century in South Africa. As a boy, he learnt about poverty the hard way. In London's East End after the first world war, conditions approximated the Khayelitsha of today. This helped Ted Frazer to understand the struggle of the African people here, in a way that many of his comrades in the trade unions appreciated.

Ted Frazer also learnt about politics in the East End. He came from a family of rank-and-file trade unionists;

he often talked of his father and grandfather who lead strikes in their own times. As a boy, he gained much of his education from the local workers' library; this formative experience impelled him in 1982 to become a founder member of the Cape Town Trade Union Library, which he served as chairman until his death.

During the second world war, he came out to the then Rhodesia in the uniform of the Royal Air Force, but was sent back to England before the war's end. Africa must have gripped his spirit then, as for so many others, for shortly after the war he emigrated to South Africa and worked in Johannesburg for several years. During this period, he

was a journalist on *Drum* and participated in many of the industrial disputes of those tumultuous times, including the white building worker's strike of 1946.

He became by degrees the secretary of three unions. And as secretary, he fought a thousand battles against unfairness and another thousand to improve workers' conditions. Ted Frazer was a street-wise negotiator and a stickler for correct procedure. Had he had a more privileged background, he would have been a top-flight lawyer – something he often spoke of with regret. His knowledge of labour law and the industrial agreements was unsurpassed.

There are many mysteries in Ted's life, and now that he has gone, we may never know the full

range of his experience. Certainly, he embraced left-wing politics at an early age, and developed then a number of beliefs about equality and justice from which he never wavered.

He was actively involved in left-wing politics in England and South Africa after the war, but broke decisively from Stalinism at an early point. This divided him from many erstwhile colleagues. But when repression made life uncomfortable for so many activists in the early 1950's, Ted Frazer stayed and continued the work in his own way; many of his comrades at that time left the country or dropped out, abandoning their principles as well as their friends. Ted Frazer never earned riches, nor popular acclaim. But he stayed the course.

Sadly, he was already an elderly man by the time that political opportunities arose again in the 1980's. He enthusiastically exploited the openings for the trade union movement then, and was one of the first to bring African workers into his unions, not only as members but as shop stewards and leaders. But he found it difficult to fit into the new style of work. After a brief and unhappy affiliation with FOSATU – the forerunner of COSATU – Ted Frazer withdrew from the mainstream. This robbed the union movement of his wealth of experience, and led to a certain bitterness which did not show him at his best.

He was an early and staunch proponent of non-racialism. But Ted's principles were inflexible. He could not tolerate the ducking and diving which he detected so often in the unions of the day. He

though the leaders were politicians, not real trade unionists. Many of the very people whom he catechised in the 1980's, are now cabinet ministers. He would have watched their activities in government today with a wry amusement; he had never doubted that he, old as he was, would outlast them as a trade unionist!

The new unionism of the 1980's had no room for Ted Frazer. One of his unions, the Brewery Workers' Union, was smashed in a raid by one of the new, national unions for black workers. Another, the Liquor and Catering Trades Employees Union, was merged with a national union after Ted had been summarily compelled to resign.

But Ted was a fighter and a survivor. Despite these setbacks, and despite the understandable bitterness which he could not always conceal, he soldiered on as secretary of the Jewellers' and Goldsmiths' Union. Poetic justice shortly made him secretary of the Hotel, Bar and Catering Trades' Employees' Association, rival to the union which had so abruptly found it necessary to dispense with him. His enemies found that Ted Frazer was not that easy to cast aside.

The 1980's saw the creation of a different type of trade union movement to the one he was comfortable with, and which was impatient of the lessons and experience

which Ted Frazer brought with him and could not forebear from using. But if he found it difficult to adjust to the new political conditions, he continued to play a highly progressive role in a different way. As a founder and chairman of the Cape Town Trade Union Library, and an enthusiast for the Labour Research Service, Ted Frazer contributed to the all-round development of the trade union movement, and especially its intellectual development. He supported particularly the training programmes for shop stewards which the Trade Union Library put on, and which produced many of today's senior officials. Ted Frazer was always dismissive of bureaucrats; anything which would enrich the trade union tradition would find him a strong and active supporter.

Now he has gone – another link with the past is broken, and the trade union movement is robbed of its most stalwart leader. Although sometimes jeered at as a maverick, Ted Frazer held firm to the basic principles of the great movement into which he was born and which he served in the ranks and as a leader. We can only hope that, amongst the thousands of ordinary workers whom Ted has trained and nurtured, there are a few indigenous Ted Frazers who will in time rise up from the ranks to serve their people as well as he did.

RGY, 14 September 1994