

## Ray Alexander: socialist & trade unionist

Ray Alexander first came to South Africa on 6 November 1929. She had attended illegal study groups and been an active member of the 'International Organisation to Help Revolutionaries' in Latvia since she was fifteen. Her mother, fearing for her safety, sent her to South Africa, where they heard the Communist Party was legal. Ray was very disappointed the day after she arrived because there were no October Revolution celebrations on the 7 November. She couldn't understand why this was so, especially in a country where the Party was legal. After thirty years of pioneering work in trade union organisation, in particular the Food and Canning Workers Unions, the Communist Party and the Federation of South African Women, amongst others, Alexander and her husband, Jack Simons, left South Africa in 1965. She continued her close involvement with the liberation movement in exile, and now she has returned to her adopted country. Comrade Ray visited the *Bulletin* offices, and spoke to us about many issues.

### **COSATU: an impressive giant**

It is very great to be back. The one thing that I'm very impressed with is the great formation of COSATU. As soon as COSATU was established I called it a great giant in an article in the *African Communist*. I'm particularly impressed with the large number of women trade union officials. Of course the women will say there are not enough, but... you know they say Rome wasn't built in one day.

I'll say it time and again, that without COSATU, that without this big organisation and the strikes that COSATU carried over the years, this break-through which Nelson Mandela is talking about would not have taken place. It is the working class

and what they are doing that affects the economy of our country.

### **New situation filled with hope**

I'm very confident. When comrades were expressing fears about Jack and me I said, No - its a new situation. And the more I see it the more I believe it. Things can't go back, we can only push them forward. So I have great confidence.

Our movement is not what it was when we left 25 years ago. When we left comrades were afraid to say goodbye to us. Even if I saw people on the street and I wanted to say goodbye, they would turn their heads away. We are coming back to a new situation altogether, and I'm looking forward to the other comrades coming here.

### **Tremendous writers and poets**

You know we South Africans are very lucky. Not only do we have tremendous leaders like Comrade Nelson, Comrade Walter Sisulu, Comrade Govan and all the others - but our people, the poets and writers! I'm a lover of poetry.

I have tried to best of my ability to learn what is happening and always refer to the *Labour Bulletin* and other South African publications. I've been a subscriber from the beginning.

### **SACTU's role in COSATU's formation**

We made a big input in the formation of COSATU. Because you know there were problems with the formation of COSATU and the other unions, and we worked very hard on these. We met comrades in Lusaka, Gaborone, Harare, pleading with them to be an all-embracing COSATU. There were all kinds of leanings - ultra left, and a bit reactionary. Racism was entering in it. And we had to iron it out. So I'm not saying that COSATU is a SACTU formation, but SACTU made a big input.

And to my mind now the SACTU comrades must come and work in COSATU unions, and help to make them stronger... There are still plenty of workers to be organised. Not only the farmworkers but the large numbers of workers that are not in the unions yet. So we have a big job to do to organise the unorganised. To or-

ganise the unemployed and to fight for jobs.

### Political and administrative training

I am going to make myself available to FAWU to give their members political and administrative training. Because over the years I've trained hundreds of people, literally, in South Africa. That is why the Food and Canning Workers Union and the African Food and Canning Workers Union were lasting - because I had built up trade union people.

To teach them how to look after the funds, minute taking, correspondence, how to negotiate. We used to have mock conciliation boards. On this side the bosses. On that side the workers. And at times I used to go on the bosses side and argue how bosses argue, and then on the other side. And that is the way I trained them so that the workers could negotiate on their own in the factories as well as on conciliation boards. And all sat on wage boards.

When in 1970 the Wages Commissions started, I corresponded with some of the people involved. I advised them to apply to the Wage Board because any kind of confrontation with the bosses educates the workers. In the process you prepare the wage demands and you discuss them. That's the way I started - I would like to go back and do similar work.

### White workers

There was a time in South Africa when the white workers were working close to us. I mean there was Jannie Venter, the leader of the Bus Workers of South Africa in Johannesburg. There was Johanna Cornelius and Hester Cornelius. They had a following. We must examine who are the working class and where there are white workers, if there really are white workers and not only in the upper jobs. We must get to them.

### Bluffed about socialism

When the new situation in Eastern Europe broke out it was a great shock to me personally. I have been in the movement for a long, long time, 60 years. And I defended the Soviet Union at all times, and Eastern Europe. And when I came out in exile I went to Czechoslovakia, the GDR, the Soviet Union, Hungary, Romania and to Bulgaria. I haven't been to Yugoslavia.

Therefore the news that broke, well it made me very unhappy. I felt in a way that I was bluffed. Many times I had arguments in our house. My own children would say: "Mummy, this is what we hear is happening in the socialist countries." And I would tell them what I have seen. But I had not seen what other people had seen. Because I was put in a posh hotel. I was going from one meeting to another meeting. I went to factories, but I've never really been in the homes of people, except in Hungary.



### Workers still striking for cloak rooms

I read in the Moscow News one day that the bus workers in Moscow went on strike. They were striking for a cloak room or a rest room in their area where they knock off. When I read it I said to a Soviet comrade: "You mean to tell me that your workers must strike for it in 1989, when our workers in Cape Town struck and won it in 1932!"

So altogether it was a big shock to me. I have been told perestroika will bring about greater improvements in the economy. But I didn't know that their economy is in a bad way. Remember, the Soviet Union has been helping us a great deal. Food and clothing. They were and are great supporters of our movement.

### Romania and the GDR: great disappointments

As far as Romania is concerned, that is a very great tragedy. I went to Romania and I saw things for myself. That was in 1974 or 75. I was not at all impressed, because I saw that the upper groups in the leadership of the trade unions, the women and in the party were living high. Now the GDR was a great disappointment to me. I thought that they were democrats. But to my mind they had not been democrats, they were not socialists.

A new crop of people have come up, the leaders who will be dedicated socialists, and that is where the hope lies. I am a great believer that socialism will triumph in the Soviet Union and in the other countries. I think that they will reorganise. ☆