

# Recalling the past

## The Labour Bulletin

inspired the commitment and loyalty of so many over the years. A number of former editors and board members recall its history and contribution to the labour movement.

### LOOKING BACK IS HARD TO DO

Former editor and board member **John Mawbey** argues that whilst so much has changed since the old days, with a few minor changes, we might sometimes be speaking of the current moment.

'In flipping through 30 years of Labour Bulletins I am overwhelmed by all the prominent names associated with it at various times. Some remain associated with the labour movement in one or another way. The question is whether such association, indirectly through the alliance, or through union investment companies contributes still to the particular tradition of struggle that arose in the wake of the 1973 strikes and the intervention of a small group of intellectuals imbued with an urge to change the world.

Don't get me wrong. They were also very conscious of the need to build worker control over trade unions. The influences

### LINDA ENSOR TALKS ABOUT HER EXPERIENCES AT THE BULLETIN

The first issue of the South African Labour Bulletin came out in April 1974. It was a humble beginning. The articles were typed on an electric IBM typewriter, with no tabulated spacing; printing was done on a roneo machine; and the cover was a glossy cardboard with a different coloured type for each issue.

A simple but brave start to a project conceived mainly by then banned political science lecturer Rick Turner and his wife Fozzia Fisher together with other academics from the University of Natal and trade unionists. Fozzia at the time was running a worker education institute, the Institute for Industrial Education (IIE) which was founded the previous year by a group of trade unionists and academics in Natal as a registered correspondence college offering a one year diploma course in trade unionism.

The Bulletin's aim was to provide a forum for intellectual debate about trade-unionism and worker rights. The labour movement at the time was in the throes of a mighty battle for recognition, particularly in Durban. The launch of the Bulletin and in fact the IIE itself came in the wake of the wave of strikes that battered against the exclusionary labour regime. Not surprisingly the title of the first edition was 'The Case for African Unions'.

The introduction in the launch issue reads as follows: 'In this period of ferment in the field of industrial relations in SA, the Institute for Industrial Education feels that a regular publication on labour affairs in SA is highly desirable. This Bulletin will carry news concerning worker

organisations, accounts of research being undertaken in SA into problems of industrial relations, and articles of general interest to trade unionists and workers. It will also attempt to contribute to the loud debate over trade unions now going on in South Africa.'

The first editorial board consisted of trade unionists Harriet Bolton and John Copelyn, University of Natal economics lecturer Alec Erwin and sociology lecturer Eddie Webster, Fozzia Fisher and IEC staffers, Gwen Mokoape and Harold Nxasana. Behind the scenes Rick Turner exercised an enormous influence.

Our offices were situated in Central Court, in Gale Street, then an industrial area of Durban. The converted block of flats of which we occupied one unit also housed SA Textile Workers Union and the SA Metal Workers Union. Copelyn, Omar Badsha, Dave Hemson, Halton Cheadle, Alpheus Mthethwa, and other well-known names in the labour movement were frequent visitors to the building.

The staff of the Bulletin consisted of Fozzia who was the overall coordinator and myself as typist, delivery-lady, subscription department, accountant and general organiser. Deliveries and errands were executed on my Vespa scooter. Mxolisi worked at a furious pace in the roneo room.

Most of the early contributors to the Labour Bulletin were academics and trade unionists. Turner's banning order prevented him from expressing his views so his articles appeared under other people's names, mine included on occasion.



1974-1983

*The influences that formed their thinking were by no means monolithic. Its core was a new wave of neo-Marxist writing, but even more than that the echoes of a student revolt in the west against a soulless modernity and a student resistance to invading Russian tanks in Czechoslovakia.*

*Spotsome familiar faces*

that formed their thinking were by no means monolithic. Its core was a new wave of neo-Marxist writing, but even more than that the echoes of a student revolt in the west against a soulless modernity and a student resistance to invading Russian tanks in Czechoslovakia. This doesn't mean that at times we were not seemingly keen on being a vanguard of revolutionary intellectuals following the lessons of Lenin! But 1968 had changed the meaning of many things and raised new issues in the struggle for a better world.

Then there was the Vietnam War. Today there is Iraq. Two names immediately spring to life for me. The first is Rick Turner. Assassinated at his front door in 1978 by perpetrators yet unknown. During most of my period as editor he was a key reference point and produced a number of the editorial pieces. He was banned so his name never appears. This often involved having to pick him up on the spur of the moment from one point

such as the city library and go off to meet in one or other of his friend's houses. All of which involved keeping a wary eye out as to whether I/we were being followed by the security branch. At that time I must admit that I was overawed by most of my intellectual comrades, but Rick had been a key influence long before I met him. His book *Eye of the Needle* remains for me a concise statement of all of the liberations, personal and political, that were key influences in the choices I made to join the unions. Yet from the moment I first actually met him I always felt put at ease. Often when I go on about participatory democracy I am reminded that it was in that book that I first came across the term.

The second is Ravi Joshi. Fellow worker in the IIE and also an early editor of the Bulletin. Murdered at his front door two years ago. He taught me bookkeeping and helped me with advice as I struggled to set up an effective administrative system. We would have endless political discussions as

we worked at some very mundane things. In various ways he was to be of assistance both then and in future years helping the unions.

The other key reference point was Eddie Webster. What can I say? That his handwritten pieces challenged my cryptology skills! Yet without his devotion to the Bulletin and effort in procuring copy, and his push for the Bulletin to extricate itself from within the working context, and control, of the TUACC unions I doubt it would have survived and flourished, and played the important role in facilitating debate across the emerging trade union movement of the late 70s that it was to play.

I cannot say that taking the opportunity to fill the editor role was my first choice. It was a vacancy and an opportunity to get into the unions. Secondly, it was a backroom job rather than being absolutely on the front line of learning the skills of organising workers in what were not the

easiest of times. Yet from the start the Bulletin job threw me immediately into the everyday work and politics of the IIE and TUACC. For a period as editor I was also secretary to CWIU and thereafter to TUACC.

There was always a tug of war over exactly what the role of the Bulletin should be. There were those who tended to want to see it as somehow being a major vehicle for communicating with worker leadership and supporting their debates. There was always the pressure to be connected to current events versus the availability of academic papers on the left. The academics, many of whom appear on the editorial board list, either passed on their papers, or those they gathered at international conferences. Until 1979 there was perhaps not enough substance to the unions to provide copy that was more current and engaged.

The Bulletin was, surprisingly, self sufficient for a number of years, and paid my wage even as half my work was union or IIE work! Then there was multi-skilling. The managing editor was also the subscriptions manager, bookkeeper, sometimes typist, sometimes printer due to printers drinking bouts, always collator, and labourer, carrying piles of Bulletins for binding and back before addressing envelopes and dispatching. To this day when I see someone wanting to duck out of some really lousy and tedious work I get angry. It's called compensating for youthful commitment to walking round and round two large old boardroom tables for up to 12 hours or more for the cause. My youthful trance dance? Let's say ways had to be found to dull the boredom and let the imagination free.

Haliburton and Glover printed the covers and bound the Bulletins. There was Halliburton, big with a ruddy complexion and clear liking for whisky, and his two elderly Indian compositors. All long-standing members of the Typographical Union. His printing works was a veritable museum of old and already obsolete lead print printing machinery. Some things have changed! He too had to put up with visits from the security branch.

Then there were those banned in 1974 like David Hemson and Halton Cheadle who I was told to pester for copy. Can't remember that I succeeded! I think so. Halton Cheadle in

## JOHANN MAREE, WHO WAS ON THE LABOUR BULLETIN EDITORIAL BOARD FOR 28 YEARS RECALLS HIS ACTIVITIES...

The first Labour Bulletin appeared in April 1974, at a time when black (African) trade unions that subsequently formed the base of Cosatu were just starting to emerge. I joined the SALB editorial board two years later in April 1976 when the Board expanded to national representation, not only Durban representatives. I left 28 years later in April 2004 when it was decided to restructure the editorial board.

At an AGM in Johannesburg on 5 February 1978 I was unanimously elected as chairperson of the editorial board. I was subsequently re-elected unanimously every year until an AGM on 7 April 2001 when I stood down and Jane Barrett was elected chairperson. I had thus served as chairperson of the editorial board of SALB for 23 years.

When the Bulletin achieved its first ten years of existence in 1984 it was decided to celebrate the occasion by publishing a book containing the best Bulletin articles reflecting the stages of struggle of the independent trade union movement that emerged after the 1973 Durban strikes. The stages were broadly struggles for survival, then state and employer recognition, and finally consolidation of their power base. I was the overall editor of the publication, *The Independent Trade Unions 1974-1984: Ten Years of the South African Labour Bulletin* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press), while other

particular should have owed me one. I was visiting his home to discuss an article. We were sitting on his veranda at the back of the house overlooking an open space filled with thick shrub bush. Suddenly the security branch arrived. I took off into the night little knowing how steep and terraced the lawn was. Next I was flying head long and crashing into the bush. Why am I convinced there were brambles? I must have stayed without movement for a good 10 to 15 minutes. The security branch spoke to Halton while walking along the road overlooking the patch and

members of the Bulletin's Editorial Board were sub-editors of sections of the book. These sections dealt with the emergence of the unions, the strikes they engaged in, the state labour policy they had to contend with, the intensive registration debate, and the political role of the unions up to 1984.

In the early days of the Bulletin, roughly in its first decade of existence, the editorial board played a much more active and influential role than became the practice later on. Partly it was due to the lack of resources of the Bulletin at that time, but partly because members of the Board were directly engaged with the trade unions in their day-to-day struggles and were therefore in a good position to contribute directly to the Bulletin. The Labour Bulletin has been one of the most meaningful activities I have been privileged to participate in. Membership of the Editorial Board, when I joined it in 1976, was a natural extension of my engagement with the independent trade union movement. I had been involved as an organiser and educator with the Western Province Workers' Advice Bureau from its inception on 9 March 1973 (it subsequently became the Western Province General Workers' Union in 1977). It has been a pleasure to watch the Bulletin, and the labour movement it supported, grow in strength and stature over the decades.

flashed a torch around. Then they lost interest. So much for getting copy.

So what was it that drove us to engage in the long task of building unions? How much of those impulses to change the world still informs our work today? Does it matter? The new-new-new left says that unions are in any event a moribund formation from the 20th century that will not play any role in bringing about a better world for all. I beg to differ. But that is for another piece I would like to write for the Bulletin of the many I have never written.'

# goldenyears.

AngloGold Ashanti salutes the outstanding contribution that the South African Labour Bulletin has made to the understanding of labour relations in South Africa over the past 30 years. We look forward to the next 30 years.



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