

# The role of “intellectuals” in trade unions



## *A discussion between JABU GWALA\* and MIKE MURPHY\*\**

### **\* JABU GWALA:**

Recently elected general secretary of SACTWU, Jabu started his working life in the garden of a white homeowner (who called Jabu “Jakob”), before getting a job at Frame Textiles where he became a shopsteward. After being fired in a strike, he became a union official and rose up the ranks from there.

### **\*\* MIKE MURPHY:**

Active as a student in a Wages Commission from 1971, Mike became a founder organiser of the Durban-based TUACC unions which merged into FOSATU, then COSATU. Banned in 1976, Mike returned from 12 years exile and worked for 4 years alongside Jabu Gwala in ACTWUSA/SACTWU.

**Mike Murphy:** This discussion arose out of the chance remark that you made to me after various union leaders were nominated by COSATU to stand for election to Parliament. You said that the departure of “intellectuals” to Parliament – or for other reasons – would bring about a decline in the union movement. Why do you think this is so? And what *is* an “intellectual” anyway?

**Jabu Gwala:** There will be a decline, but not a collapse. “Intellectuals” have played a very important role in the unions. Look at my situation: As general secretary I have now to take on tasks previously done by intellectuals in my union. I now have to instruct other intellectuals (eg lawyers) as to what to do, by exercising my discretion across a range of factors: If a course of action is taken, will the union gain or lose, will it establish a precedent, will it undermine the relationship with the employer? The professional intellectuals I instruct do not have to exercise the same discretion, and they can disagree with me on the course of action I recommend.

**MM:** I see a distinction between the intellectual as professional, and the intellectual as strategist. The union can hire intellectual skills for a limited area: accounting, legal advice, etc. What your union has gained from in the past, however, is the input of intellectuals as leaders, strategisers, planners: for example Halton Cheadle early on, John Copelyn later. Although some people have argued that such individuals have held back those around them, “dominated” them, made it impossible for them to develop. What was your experience?

**JG:** I was never held back myself. My history explains itself. I grew from a shopfloor worker, to worker leader, to organiser, and on from there. I founded a region of the union ‘the Eastern Cape’ and built it from scratch. I was there for six

years. I think John Copelyn – the union general secretary at the time – came there twice during the whole time. I felt I had the whole world in my hands. I never felt held back. I have learned a lot from John. He always made himself available to talk when needed. And it was not only me that he pushed forward: At various stages there was June-Rose Nala, Obed Zuma, Isaac Ndlovu, Elias Banda; more recently Lionel October. In my experience, we worked as a team in my union. It was not a big team, but it was a team.

**MM:** In my view the key intellectual capacity we are talking about here, is the ability to see the big picture, to weigh up a broad range of factors, and to plan and strategise from there. Although it *helps* to have gone to university and to have picked up technical skills (accounting, law, etc), it is not essential. Unions can hire people with these skills, and obviously it will help you to supervise them if you have these skills yourself, but it is not essential. What is essential in my view is a practice, gained through experience, of thinking broadly and systematically about matters, weighing up pros and cons, and making rational decisions as a consequence. But if you have worked in a team that *follows* this practice, then you *become* an “intellectual” (in my sense of the word) over time.

**JG:** Agreed.

**MM:** If we look back over the 70’s and 80’s it is noticeable that the “intellectuals” who involved themselves in the union movement were, firstly, mostly whites, then later many Indians and Coloureds became involved. This input was sparked to a large extent by the “Wages Commissions” on the white university campuses. The student activists argued that intellectuals should get out of their “ivory towers” and seek to make their intellectual work and skills available to ordinary people, especially the most disadvantaged among them.





Miss Pat Horn.



Mr. Chris Albertyn.



Mr. Mike Murphy.



Mr. John Copeland.



Mrs. Jeanette Murphy.

## State ban on 8 'fear of jobless'

The state didn't like "intellectuals", & trade unions either

But where were the African intellectuals at that time? Where are they now?

**JG:** The answer lies in the structure of politics in South Africa. African "intellectuals" opted for popular politics. In fact most of those who (mostly later on) came into unions came with a political "ticket" i.e they came in to recruit the unions to a particular political position.

But there were also whites and Indians who came in on the same basis. Some were recruited to a political course *after* they had already involved themselves in the unions.

**MM:** It's interesting to compare this process with the different political/labour interactions in other countries. The classic counterpoint is the British/German comparison: in Britain the unions started the labour party, in Germany the labour party started the unions.

In South Africa the absence (through banning) of organisations like the ANC and SACP, made space for other ideologies, like Black Consciousness. In the 1970s the BC people were highly critical of "whites'" involvement with "black" workers. Yet hardly any of these black intellectuals made any consistent input in the field of labour organisation. Why do you think this happened?

**JG:** The BC criticism of white intellectuals was based on their black vs white vision. They mistrusted whites in unions, thinking that whites were there to get more power over blacks.

BC didn't really move much into unions, it moved more towards popular politics. When I worked in Eastern Cape, there was still lots of BC stuff going on, lots of anti-white stuff. I heard for example Bernie Fanaroff criticised by people *in* MAWU/NUMSA for "dominating", as if he was someone *outside* MAWU/NUMSA.

When I first came to the Eastern Cape, I was called to a meeting and "scrutinised" to see if I was a "workerist". The line against so-called workerists was that they "took people away from the liberation struggle."

**MM:** Was there any intellectual content to this?

**JG:** There were slogans. I tried to get people to think, not just repeat the slogans against each other. There was the East London Youth Congress and the East London Youth Organisation, both in my area. One was pro SAAWU, the other pro COSATU. I tried to mediate between the factions. But I was not really trusted. Most Eastern Cape unions around that time adopted the freedom charter – mine did not. We always had a rather sophisticated and controversial position. We did not just follow slogans.

But if I go back to the early 70's and try to place the "white intellectuals" and the Wages Commissions in their context, I would say their input was valuable. The formation of unions at that time was very important in renewing the spirit of resistance.

**MM:** We are witnessing a rapid "Africanisation" of union leadership at senior level. How do you see this? Is it a form of "Affirmative Action" and does it mean that non-Africans should not stand for senior office in unions at this time?

**JG:** It is not "Africanisation", it is coming

to reality. One can't avoid this. Africans are the vast majority of organised labour. In my view the issue now is of commitment, not colour. Some intellectuals who were in unions are now out marketing

themselves and their skills as in a business. It is not appropriate for such people to be in a high position in a union.

Other "professionals" are approaching the unions in search of a living. They have no commitments, they are pursuing their careers. These people would resign and leave a union which is having problems. They won't challenge what they see as being wrong, they won't seek power.

**MM:** Many unions – in South Africa and elsewhere – are today led by people who came into the unions as a "professional" (for example as a lawyer) and stayed on, gained experience and finally became general secretaries, etc. Do you accept that this could now take place in COSATU unions?

**JG:** The issue is commitment. A leader does not have to have been a worker on a shopfloor. I see no problem with this.

**MM:** What is the boundary line between commitment and career? One of the tests of commitment in the unions in the past was money. Pay was always low, and skilled people working for low pay were assumed to be committed. But with the changes in government, many people are saying that they can no longer ask their families to go on making the enormous sacrifices they made for "the struggle". If unions keep to a poverty wage system, they may lose all staff except either a handful of very committed people, or people who simply cannot find jobs







anywhere else!

**JG:** I adopt the position that my commitment to my work should not force my family to suffer. There should be reasonable compensation. But I accept that some union officials will have much higher expectations regarding salary.

**MM:** How will salaries be determined? By negotiation? Do you accept that union staff should be unionised, like in Britain, to negotiate their wages?

**JG:** I have less of a problem with this idea where it concerns the union employees in "blue collar" or clerical grades. Where it comes to the more senior officials, a more sophisticated system of payment, measured in terms of factors such as motivation and commitment, is needed.

**MM:** So two bargaining units perhaps, a junior and senior?

**JG:** Perhaps. We have to think carefully what to do. Intellectuals have to be attracted to work in unions. We need economic analysis, analysis of union government relations, tripartism etc. We do not want a situation to develop where the government merely *consults* with unions and then goes off and does what it wants quite irrespective of what unions want. We want to make the government *listen*. We need new goals, new strategies. All this requires intellectual input.

**MM:** Unions will never be able to match private sector pay, but intellectuals set a high value on interesting and meaningful work, and will work for moderate pay if they like their jobs. But intellectuals also get easily frustrated. If they feel their best efforts are being undermined by arbitrary executive decisions, they will soon leave.

Intellectuals will need a clear mandate from unions and leadership to cover a certain (broad) area, and then be allowed to be creative and resourceful in that field. This demands a clearly-demarcated relationship between professionals and leadership.

**JG:** Agreed. We must open up scope where intellectuals can work with pride in what they do. We must think about how they report back. It may be inappropriate to report on some matters – I'm thinking of highly technical issues – directly to the (worker) executive. For example, if I have to make a report to my executive on an issue like tariffs, I first have to teach them all about that subject before they can take decisions appropriately. But you can't expect an executive to spend all their time in an ongoing seminar being taught about such issues. We have to develop new systems of accountability and allow the leadership to run the union, and to allow skilled staff freedom to handle the many complex technical matters without being delayed by their reports never being read, decisions being endlessly deferred, and so on.

**MM:** The danger would be that elected leadership loses control of their organisation to the professionals/intellectuals who have greater access to information. But, interestingly, there is an area in a number of COSATU unions where intellectuals in a key position of influence have remained subordinate to elected leadership. I am thinking of union education departments, often staffed by intellectuals with quite different "leftish" politics from that of the union leadership, who have done a responsible job within their mandate. There has been no case, as far as I am aware, of any attempted "subversion".

**JG:** Or, looked at another way, union leadership has been successful at keeping such people within the framework of their professional mandate. ☆