

The necessity of utopian thinking

The formation of the Labour Bulletin was the inspiration of assassinated academic Rick Turner. **Eddie Webster** provides a personal account of his meeting with Turner and the sacrifices made to keep the Bulletin alive to achieve Turner's vision. While we live in a different world, that vision continues...

I arrived in Durban in late February 1973, just as the mass strikes were ending, to take up a lectureship in the department of sociology at the University of Natal. I was met at the airport by the head of the department, a middle-aged man in a safari suit. It was one of those very hot muggy Durban summer afternoons. A safari suit was the regulation dress for a white male in those days and I rapidly fell into line.

Earlier that week Richard Turner, a political science lecturer at the university, had been banned under the Suppression of

Communism Act. The atmosphere was tense. Steve Biko, a close friend of Turner, had also been banned. I dropped my bags at a sleazy hotel in downtown Durban and went straight to Turner's house. I had never met Rick before but we soon connected. We were roughly the same age and the thinking of the New Left had shaped us both - he had studied at the Sorbonne and I at Oxford.

The main themes of Rick's ideas had been set out in that remarkable book published in 1972, *The Eye of the Needle*. In it he stressed the capacity of people to change the world in which they lived, while at the same time providing them with a vision of a future South Africa based on participatory democracy. Most importantly, Turner placed heavy emphasis on the significance of black workers in the economy. He believed that it was through collective organisation, especially trade unions, that black people could exercise some control over their lives and influence the direction of change in South Africa.

Turner outlined to me that afternoon an extraordinarily ambitious plan of what had to be done. He said we need to set up a correspondence college to educate black workers on the nature of trade unionism as well as the economy and society. This was launched later that year as the Institute of Industrial Education (IIE). We needed, he said, to write a book on the recent strikes. This had already begun and was being edited by Johann Maree and published in 1974 as the *Durban Strikes 1973*. We also needed, he said, a research department to analyse economic trends and a peoples' history of the South African working class. We later appointed Charles Simkins as the first researcher in the IIE and Luli Callinicos began producing a history page for the workers newspaper *Abasebenzi*. This was to develop into the award-winning trilogy, *Gold*

and *Workers, Working Life* and *A Place in the City*.

We also needed, Rick said, a journal to describe, explain and legitimate unions for black workers. That of course became the South African Labour Bulletin launched in 1974. The editorial board for the first edition consisted of Harriet Bolton, John Copelyn, Alec Erwin, Foszia Fisher, Gwen Mokoape, Bekisisi Nxasana and myself. Linda Ensor became the first editor (nominally it was John Copelyn but he had his eye on bigger things!) As it turned out the Bulletin was the project that caught my imagination and I served on the board for 27 years until I resigned in 2002 to make way for a new generation.

Turner was not alone in this political and educational project. In fact he was taking the lead from a remarkable generation of students such as David Hemson, Halton Cheadle, Charles Nupen, Karel Tip, Johann Maree, Alec Erwin and many others who had already begun entering industrial plants to gather information from workers on wages and working conditions in the factories in and around Durban. Through the formation of Wage Commissions on the campuses of white liberal universities they were able to bring the plight of black workers into the public domain and through Benefit Societies lay the foundations for union organisation.

But of course the black working class of Durban was not some collective tabula rasa waiting empty-headed for the white intellectuals to tell them what to think. There were sympathetic trade unionists such as Harriet Bolton working in established unions, young activists such as Rob Lambert working with the Catholic workers movement, committed Indian activists such as Omar Badsha and veterans of an earlier phase of militant black trade unionism such as Bekisisa Nxasana. There was, in other

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words, a powerful political tradition among the working class in Durban with a sophisticated political culture, a long history of trade unions, as well as an underground organisation that was deeply hidden from the myopic world of the white intellectual.

To understand and contribute to the development of the labour movement, a new generation of white intellectuals had to step outside the classroom. We began to interview workers and learn about their past. The legendary AWG Champion, a leading figure in the first black trade union in the 20s was still alive and living in Durban at the time. Indeed SA Labour Bulletin 1 (6) in September/October 1974 was devoted almost entirely to drawing lessons on the rise and decline of the ICU, including an interview with Champion himself.

But it was also a precarious and dangerous project. For the security police of the time, we were simply an arm of the alliance and they harassed everyone, especially Rick and his wife Fozzia Fisher, a Muslim woman. Fozzia did a remarkable job of holding the project together and acting as the link to Rick. We often used to meet in their home to discuss articles for the next edition. Suddenly there would be a shout, police! Rick, in terms of his very restrictive banning order, could not be with more than one person at a time. We would all scatter leaving one person behind with Rick. Fozzia would have to disappear into the kitchen as she was ostensibly the domestic servant, as it was illegal at that time for them to be married or, indeed, for her to be living in a 'white' suburb other than as a domestic servant.

The project was badly hit in 1974 when Halton Cheadle and Dave Hemson, key organisers and strategists in the emerging unions, were banned. I remember a prominent United States political scientist who subsequently became Bill Clinton's

electoral adviser, Stan Greenberg, telling me confidently in August 1974 that the Bulletin would not survive the year! The project did nearly come to an end in late 1975/1976 when Bekisisa Nxasana was detained under the Terrorism Act and viciously tortured. I was lucky. I was put on trial and was able to defend myself, and with the assistance of a distinguished legal team that included Arthur Chaskalson, George Bizos and Denis Kuny, was acquitted. In 1976 John Copelyn, Mike Murphy, Pat Horn and many other key figures, including organisers in other major centres of South Africa, were banned.

By this stage it had become much more than an intellectual project on building the capacity of workers. Black workers were on the march and becoming a force in their own right. Difficult political questions were emerging on the relationship of trade unions to the national movement. I remember seeing ex-Robben Islanders such as Jacob Zuma around the union's offices in Central Court (where the Fosatu offices were). The stakes were escalating as debates took place on how labour should relate to Inkatha. This was especially difficult as Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi was the chancellor of the board of the IIE, a wise tactical decision in the early 70s, but increasingly controversial as political loyalties began to polarise.

This early phase of the Bulletin was to come to a sad end when on 8 February 1978 the Durban security police assassinated Rick. He died in the arms of his ten-year-old daughter, Jan.

The Bulletin had already moved out of Central Court and was now based in Braamfontein in Johannesburg. It was no longer directly linked to the labour movement although it retained its supportive but critical role. What had begun as one project to build a workers' movement in South Africa was now two separate but linked thrusts, the one organisational, the

other educational and increasingly academic.

Thirty years is a long time in the life of any journal. To survive the repression of the 70s to become an independent progressive journal is something to be celebrated and nurtured. The necessary condition for the success of such a project is a group of committed people who have a vision that transcends their immediate self-interest. In *The Eye of the Needle*, Turner described this as the necessity of utopian thinking. Today global activists would say 'another world is possible!'

The Bulletin emerged as part of a broad opposition movement to apartheid. The challenge today goes beyond the struggles of organised workers and industrial unions. We need to engage with a democratic state while facilitating the struggles of the working poor - the casual workers, the street traders, those who work in the informal economy, the unemployed. These - the losers in the new South Africa - need to find a voice and decent jobs. But the challenge goes beyond South Africa's borders to include Southern Africa and, indeed, the whole of the Global South.

This is clearly a different world to the one Turner responded so ambitiously to three decades ago but the goal remains the same - the right of working people to a voice, income security and other forms of welfare such as education and health, a right to one's social heritage and the right to live in a safe environment. Yes it is utopian but I believe it is possible and will, one day, be realised.

This is the legacy of the South African Labour Bulletin and this is the challenge facing us as we grapple with the challenge of understanding and contributing to fair globalisation in Southern Africa.

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