

# “The struggle to be reborn”: *20 years of the labour movement*

Twenty years of Labour Bulletin is also 20 years of the trade union movement. SIPHO KUBHEKA\* speaks to Luli Callinicos\*\* about those tough early days when he was a worker, organiser and political activist.

## **THE STRUGGLE TO BE REBORN WITHOUT UNIONS**

I left school in 1971, when I was doing Standard Nine. I started working as an ordinary clerk at a company called Immextra House.

I did plan to do matric – in fact to go beyond that. I was very interested in law.

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But because of the financial situation in my family I could not go further. I happened also to be a father at a very early stage. Those are the two major things which changed my life.

I met a very interesting guy at that factory. He had done ten years in Robben Island. He was a member of the African National Congress and also a member of the SA Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU). He started introducing labour politics to a few of us whom he had befriended. This guy was banned at that time but he tried to organise us.

His name was Elias(Robert) Mancini. He is now dealing with finance administration in the ANC.

When he introduced us to labour politics he started with the activities of SACTU, and how SACTU and the ANC had been working together in those early years. When he spoke about changing the conditions of workers in the factory for the better he actually meant it. You see we were in the offices, being clerks, and we regarded ourselves as better people than the others. He said to us we needed to change our attitudes towards the other workers.

Being a clerk at that period was some kind of a prestige. We had our own offices, our own desk. Other workers would make tea for us. We would drink the tea and just push the cup aside and this woman would come collect the cup and wash it. So he had to deal with our attitudes first.

He said: "I am suggesting that from now onwards you must make tea for yourself. And after having that tea, wash your cups." We were stunned because we were clerks – we were not supposed to wash cups and make tea. That was a turning point in our lives because these women started accepting us as their equals. They would come into our offices, sit down and have a chat with us.

The labourers saw us clerks as people who were aloof from them – people who wanted to be respected. We therefore had difficulty in getting access to them. The purpose of that access was to organise them into a structure in the factory – a workers'

structure.

There used to be trucks from the railways which brought boxes to the factory, because it was a mail-order company. Mancini said that when these trucks come in to be off-loaded, we must go down and assist in off-loading.

We resisted that. The people we had grown up with in the township knew us as clerks – people who wear suits and ties and work in offices. They would see us as very low people if we carried boxes.

He was the first person to volunteer. He got himself a dust-coat and went down to off-load. Seeing him, as a senior clerk, off-loading compelled us to act likewise. That paid lots of dividends afterwards. We won the hearts of ordinary labourers, because they started identifying us as one of them. So the situation became very easy then for us to organise those workers into a factory union.

We were struggling to be reborn. There had been unions in the past, so we were not starting something new. But the struggle to be reborn was a very intense and painful one. We did not have anything to look at as a mirror, except the oral history that Mancini had given us.

But there was a fear about a banned ANC and imprisoned leadership. There was a fear to talk politics. Ordinary workers would say: "Look, you mustn't talk to this guy. He will be arrested. You'll go to the Island."

I was very interested in the ANC. Local people, in our yards, would talk about people like Mandela: "Mandela will spend his whole life in prison", "Oh we have problems now", "What will happen to the ANC?" and so on. I had some understanding of what the ANC was, but not what it stood for. There was an oral history, but not a presence, of the ANC.

We had to work very quietly for a long time in organising our colleagues in the factory. At the same time we were introduced by Mancini to the Industrial Aid Society (IAS), which was just starting. He was part of the people who started the IAS.

The first people in the IAS included the late Jeannette Curtis, Glen Moss, Miriam Sithole, Elliot Shabangu, Elias Mohlabe, Joe



Gqabi and Pindile Mfeti – the guy who disappeared.’

It was a combination of different factors at that point in history. White students were feeling very bitter and rejected by the black students who pulled out of NUSAS and formed SASO. So they became involved in the labour scene. Some lecturers were also involved. Sheldon Leader, Phil Bonner, Peter Hudson, Taffy Adler and Bernie Fanaroff<sup>7</sup> were involved later in IAS.

You had two groups who did not see eye to eye politically. There were the students and lecturers who felt sidelined by Nationalist politics, on the one hand, and some white students and lecturers who were supportive of the ANC or SACTU, on the other. Yet they had a common purpose.

The dominant politics at that stage in the IAS was the anti-Nationalist politics. The SACTU-ANC people in the IAS would go to the townships to be given political education. Those who were anti-Nationalist were not part of that process.

Neil Aggett<sup>8</sup> was also active in the IAS at that time. He was working underground for the movement. He moved with us in the townships. The aim was to establish self help clinics. He also had the idea of establishing a health wing of IAS, where workers would become barefoot medics. This idea was shot down by those opposing ANC politics - perhaps they thought this would open IAS to too much influence from the townships.

The struggle to be reborn was met with stiff resistance from employers. The

employers did not know people were organised in the factory. To be accepted by the employers became a very bitter struggle. We had to make ourselves known to the employers. The employers would need to deal with an elected committee. The struggle to be reborn took the whole of 1973.

In fact we managed to change conditions prior to management’s acceptance of a workers’ committee. We used legal loopholes. For instance, people would work at a factory for over three years, but remain casual workers. We knew that if you worked at any work situation for more than three days you were no longer a casual worker. You needed to be fully registered as an employee of that company.

So people were fully registered because the employers could not run away from that fact. Those people were back-paid the leave pay that was owed to them for a period of four years. We were also able to read the Wage Board determination about wages. We were taught those things at the IAS.

All the employees became card-carrying members of the IAS, including ourselves. We attended the Saturday classes at the IAS.

Two of us were delegated by the workforce to hand a letter to management requesting union recognition. I remember that was done around two o’clock one day. At about five to five, I was called to the MD’s office. Everything was prepared – my leave pay and a letter of dismissal. I was told that my services were no longer required. It was the two of us who had presented the letter.

The aim of the employers by calling us in at five to five, was that the factory knocked off at five o’clock. Everyone would be gone when they gave us the dismissal letters.

Now what is interesting here is that the workers did not go home, because they heard that we were called into the office. They knew that something was going to happen. They waited.

When we came out, we told them that we were dismissed. They decided there and then that they were going to go on strike – to demand that we be reinstated and that the

<sup>7</sup> Joe Gqabi was assassinated by operatives of the apartheid regime in the early 1980s in Zimbabwe where he was ANC chief rep.

Jeanette Curtis was likewise assassinated in Angola. Pindile Mfeti was banned at the same time as Khubeka, banished to Transkei, and later took up articles in Durban – where he disappeared, presumably at the hands of apartheid agents. Glenn Moss is MD of Raven Press. Elias Mohlabe is still heading the IAS.

<sup>8</sup> Phil Bonner and Peter Hudson are academics at Wits University . Taffy Adler is a housing consultant. Bernie Fanaroff is advisor on the RDP to Minister Jay Naidoo.

<sup>9</sup> NA was a medical doctor who later became a union organiser. He was killed in jail in 1982.



Pic: Eli Weinberg



*SACTU organisers, 1950: many union activists in the 1970s were influenced by SACTU members who were active in the 50s*

management recognise the workers committee.

The strike lasted the whole week. The management acceded to the demand of recognising the workers' committee, but did not accede to the reinstatement.

Elias Mancini was again instrumental in changing our direction. He said to us: "The workers have gone on strike for the whole week. They are showing signs of being tired of the strike and being worried. So we must accept the dismissal, and the struggle will continue. Let the workers go back to work. We should avoid divisions."

We accepted the dismissal. Workers went back to work. That factory became very strong. It became one of the strongest organised factories of the IAS.

There was a Siphon Kubheka versus Immextra case. But there was no law which could cover me. They had in fact acted according to the letter of the law. "You are reorganising your company, and the job of this person has become redundant. You have actually given him what he should be paid, so what?"

I started working for the IAS in 1974 and continued servicing that factory and other factories as well.

## THE STRUGGLE TO BE REBORN WITH UNIONS

The second struggle which I want to refer to is the Heinemann struggle. That factory had more than 600 workers. We produced out of that factory very key leaders. A person like Mam' Lydia Kompe. And there is the old man in NUMSA, Bab K Makama – a very strong worker leader. He was a supervisor of one key section in that factory called Bakerlight. Without that department working, the whole factory would not work. So he was strategic.

He had a SACTU and ANC background. So when we were starting to organise in that factory we were not saying anything new to him. He ensured that the other workers were organised in that factory. Again things were done very quietly.

Lydia Kompe became an organiser in TGWU is now on ANC MP and was one of the early shopstewards.

In 1975 we had transformed the metal wing of the IAS into the Metal and Allied Workers Union (MAWU). When we established MAWU, Gavin Anderson, a pro-ANC founder of the IAS, became the branch secretary. In 1976 he stepped down for a political reason – because our union was predominantly African and should be African led. I then became the branch secretary.

In 1976 there was a strike at Heinemann, again around recognition of the trade union – not of the workers’ committee in this case, but of the shopstewards. Workers here were organised and they became very powerful. We achieved a majority in a very short space of time because of Makama and Mam’ Lydia.

A letter was presented to management at Heinemann with the names of the shopstewards in the factory. They were bold because the factory was key to many industries, and so it was very busy. We never thought that the company would foolishly jeopardise that situation. We were wrong.

The letter requested a meeting with management. They refused to meet with us, saying that our union was illegal. They would only accept a liaison committee.

Workers pressurised management to recognise the union through their shopstewards. That did not shift management. We believe that management took a political position not to accept this because it was an Anglo American company.

So workers went on strike. We were fetched in the early hours of the morning at our homes. Workers said that they were going to take strike action because of the dismissal of 19 shopstewards.

The company thought that with a mass dismissal of shopstewards, workers would feel scared and move back to the factory. At the same time we did not ever think that management would dismiss 600 people.

The whole factory went on strike in March 1976. It went on for a long time, I think for more than two months. One day we were addressing the workers when the police came in. They told us the meeting was



## SACTWU

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The Canadian Labour Congress extends solidarity and greetings to the South African Labour Bulletin on the occasion of its 20th anniversary.



Pic: IDAF



*The historic Heinemann strike, 1976: Garvin Andersson and Siphon Kubheka address workers before the police attack*

illegal. They gave us the five minutes warning. We told workers that we should move because there was a possibility that these people would attack.

As we were standing up to go, these guys came at us. Many people got seriously injured. Some had broken legs and arms from batons and from dog bites. There were pregnant women who were trampled on.

We were defeated in that struggle. It took a long time and lots of canvassing, not just locally but internationally as well, but we did not succeed. The employers were very anti-union in that period.

## **BANNINGS AND POLITICAL CONFLICT**

There was a lot of security branch harassment from 1975, just before the strike. They were coming to my home, warning me and also trying to recruit me. But the strike at Heinemann was the last straw for the state. We got arrested – myself and Gavin – for incitement, for being in an illegal gathering and for obstructing the police in doing their work. That was a warning of

what was to come. Although we did not think that we could be banned, we used to take precautionary measures not to get ourselves exposed too much.

After the dismissals at Heinemann, I went there and started distributing pamphlets. It did not take three minutes before the police were there. I was removed forcefully from that place.

Then we were banned, myself and Gavin and others. You had the link between the trade unions and the liberation movement already in 1976. In the Heinemann strike we got support from students in Alexandra. They assisted in distributing pamphlets. They attended our general strike meetings and agreed to canvass in the township that no one in Alexandra should go to Heinemann, although Heinemann was in Elandsfontein.

The political differences in MAWU became very intense at the beginning of 1976. Some of us – myself, Gavin, Pindile and Jeannette Curtis – were labelled as populist because we were interacting with ANC-SACTU people.

To them, SACTU had not been a proper labour movement because it was in the congress alliance and did not form very strong factory-based workers' structures.

We were seen as populists who were going to create the same mistakes which were made by SACTU in being in the congress alliance. We were seen to be people who were endangering the workers' struggle. We managed

however to prevent those opposed to the congress movement from taking over MAWU, because we had access to workers, to their factories and to the townships.

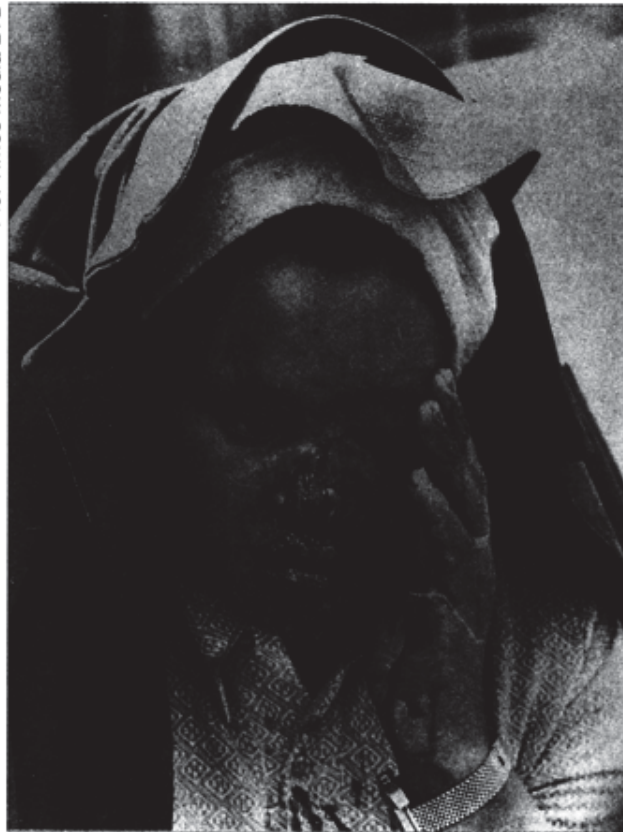
At the same time we were shielding workers from these debates. The debates were held between ourselves who were in the offices, and the students and some of the lecturers.

People did some very wrong things. I remember there was a time when one of the anti-ANC people went to one of those who was pro-ANC. He said to him: "Look we think that you are now the target of the state. They know that you have links with the movement. Here is the money, skip." They were removing people so that they could gain entry and control the union. They used some dirty tactics.

Immediately we were banned this ultra-left group took over.

Well, there were positive and negative things in that. Let me start with the negative. They took workers through seminars and workshops which were mostly anti-ANC. They drew a dividing line between what could be termed a working class

Pic: Times Media LTD



*Heinemann worker after police attack*

organisation and a nationalist or populist organisation. They managed to influence a number of key leaders to be against those who were banned.

They influenced people like Moss Mayekiso, who I had organised when he was still a worker at Toyota. Chris Dlamini was also one of those who were turned against us.'

You see we were discussed in the Federation of SA Trade Unions

(FOSATU) by these elements and we were painted negatively. We didn't have a chance. In 1982, after the banning order had expired, I applied to MAWU to work as an organiser. This matter was discussed at a FOSATU level, and it was agreed that I should not be taken.

I felt that MAWU was a strategic union. The ultra-left were controlling FOSATU through MAWU. So if you got into MAWU, you would be in a better position to put forward whatever politics you may have. But I did not get that chance. Then the Paper Wood and Allied Workers Union (PWAU), which had leanings towards congress politics, came to recruit me.

But not everything which people did was negative. I must say that the comrades did a lot of good work under the circumstances. By drawing a line between labour and politics, for a period the state did not closely watch and interfere with those people. Because the state knew of the differences within the labour movement at that time.

The unionists that were left were not

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Both became leaders in COSATU, and both are now ANC MPs





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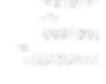
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*MAWU: the struggle to build the union was marked by political conflict*

harassed because they were not posing any serious danger to the state. The state saw the ANC as the main enemy.

### **ANEW, RICH WAY OF WORKING**

That period gave comrades time to build very strong structures which were later instrumental in creating the period which we have today. With the formation of COSATU, the blending of the political and worker-based struggles was very useful. The blending of the culture of FOSATU and the so-called UDF unions brought together a very rich way of working. Our struggles were not just confined to the factories but our struggles were also outside the factories.

The November stayaway in 1984 was a very important turning point for FOSATU. And the turning point for some worker leaders, including people like Moss Mayekiso. That strike was as a result of workers supporting students' demands. We met with the leadership of the Congress of SA Students (COSAS) and mapped out a programme of action. When I say we, there were a few who happened to belong to the congress movement politics. Then after we

had done that, the idea had to be sold to all leaders in FOSATU.

That struggle was appealing because it dealt directly with the children of the workers. So no one could say politics and union struggles didn't mix.

One good thing is that we were also holding leading positions in the townships. For instance, in Alexandra I was holding a leading position in the organising of yard and street committees.

I was introduced officially to the ANC towards the end of 1976 when I was banned. All along I was just an ANC supporter. I only became a member in 1977.

What is interesting about Mancini is that he did not recruit us to the ANC. He just gave us the basics so that we could find roots ourselves. The accusations which were levelled against the ANC by the ultra-left grouping was that the ANC was only interested in recruiting people to the military and to the ANC. Yet the ANC was introduced to us differently. We were not told to join the ANC when we were still at Immextra. We were taught labour politics, the political history of South Africa and



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international politics. That is what the ANC-SACTU people did.

Now from experience, I was able to challenge people. Our own experience says the ANC did not recruit us to join the ANC.

Mance said that he was a member of the SACP. I only joined the SACP now, not at the time. We were attending schools in Soweto and Alexandra. We were not told that this was the SACP. We were just given some schooling. People like Manci and Joe Gqabi would organise things like parties. You would go to a party and you would get into discussions, without knowing that you were at school.

## FREEDOM

The changes which have taken place in this period of transformation have thrown a number of questions to the trade union movement. We have been involved for a long time in the struggles to bring about democracy in South Africa. Although we have not yet attained a full democracy, half of the work has been done.

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We used to talk about worker control. That term referred to control in the factories, not just worker control in your union. The seeds of worker control at work – worker control of production – were planted at that early stage. The question of decision making not being the prerogative of the employers was looked at.

The employers have hijacked those demands and made them their own proposals. We have been caught napping because we did not prepare ourselves for that eventuality.

The struggles which we waged in the past were nowhere near to the current challenges which are facing us as workers and as a country. We were bringing about democracy in this country, we were fighting to better the conditions of the workers at the workplace. We were defending our members from bosses' attacks and dismissals.

The question of being exposed to global competition was not there at all. And these are the things which we are now just learning about. We were not prepared for them.

Any restructuring should not be done unilaterally by management. It should not be to the detriment of our members. We need to come with a very clear policy on how our industries must be restructured, so to improve the lot of our members and to be able to create more jobs for workers who are unemployed.

The first democratic elections in SA were a lovely experience. The seeds which were planted in those early years, and even in years before, bore fruit. Trade unionism contributed to our ability to achieve our goals through negotiation and mass action.

At the time I was working in the COSATU elections campaign. It was a lovely experience travelling through the regions, knowing we were moving towards the goal we had spoken about for many years. The whole country was quiet on 27 April. People became humans waiting in the queus to vote - not black or white, or IFP or ANC. People showed love towards each other.

We had realised the dream we fought for. That is how I felt. ☆

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