

African National Congress (ANC) London Recruits

At the height of the fervor for political and social change that shook sixties Britain, one of the most impressive solidarity movements of the twentieth century began to mobilise against South Africa's apartheid regime. At its climax the movement encompassed trade unionists and the wider labour movement, churches, local councils, student and campaign groups. The broad alliance trickled down to almost every sector of society, igniting collective action united in one common cause, freedom for South Africans from white supremacist minority rule.

It is against this backdrop that young women and men from left wing groups of workers and students were recruited for clandestine missions to assist the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa. 'I was there at the height of the sixties. Vietnam, UDI, Paris, CND, decolonisation, anti-apartheid, boycotts of Spain, Greece,' notes former NATFHE and UCU member Mary Chamberlain, reflecting on her experiences. 'We were part of a transnational movement for change, exciting and empowering, lived in the shadow of the Cold War and nuclear annihilation. It made us a generation of internationalists.'

Mary, then a recent politics graduate, was part of a generation that saw apartheid as one of the last vestiges of colonialism and imperialism. A member of the Communist Party, Mary was 23 when first approached by the ANC. Arriving in Cape Town on the SS Vaal in 1972 accompanied by her then husband, Carey Harrison, the pair assumed the role of an emigrating couple, their 'life's possessions' carefully concealing subversive ANC literature in the false bottoms of 20 or so old tea chests. 'At the time, I didn't think twice about agreeing to do what we did by smuggling in 7000 pamphlets, and thought that my effort was a small and paltry affair given the far larger sacrifices that black South Africans were making every day,' remarks Mary on her contribution. 'Of course, I am immensely proud of what we did, but it was suppressed for so very long, it's sometimes difficult to believe that I actually did that, or to find the words to process the memories.'

Reflective of the highly sensitive nature of the missions, the recruits remained silent for decades, unable to share their experiences. Unbeknown to Mary at the time, future UCU trade unionist Norman Lucas was working undercover for the ANC whilst officially employed as a photographer on the passenger liner that transported her to Cape Town. Norman, ex branch official for UCU predecessor NATFHE and bearer of collective AUT and UCU memberships that total 27 years, worked as an ANC courier on a ship dominated by white South African officers and passengers. Norman was able to conceal his activities behind the lens, subverting the system of white privilege to assist the liberation struggle.

Reflecting on his role, Norman speaks passionately about the lessons of the anti-apartheid movement and the importance of collective action as a vehicle for social change. 'London Recruits may give some optimism to the young that political activism and protest can be effective. The recruits stories show that things can change and individual and collective action can make a difference.'

John Rose, past member of NATFHE and UCU and a longstanding member of the International Socialists (later the Socialist Workers Party), has a legacy of solidarity work in movements home and abroad. During his employment as a sociology lecturer at Southwark College, John was a member of the strike committee during two major disputes in 1995 and 1997. 'During the strike I helped convince local bus drivers at Waterloo bus garage and their union the TGWU, one of the forerunners to Unite, to support us,' John recalls, highlighting the importance of a collective movement. 'On one memorable occasion a delegation of drivers turned up to express their solidarity at one of our mass strikers' meetings.'

John was among the left-wing students at the London School of Economics (LSE), recruited by underground ANC agent Ronnie Kasrils in the late 1960s. A future minister in Mandela's first government, Ronnie had registered at LSE with the task of recruiting sympathetic activists. The plan was formulated by ANC leader in exile Oliver Tambo and saw Ronnie oversee more than 40 missions against the regime from 1967.

John was impressed by the radical euphoria at an institution where 'students didn't just talk, they acted', and after entering into contact with Ronnie, eagerly accepted a mission to South Africa. John arrived in Johannesburg in November 1969 accompanied by fellow LSE student Mike Milotte. Equipped with ANC leaflets stashed in false bottom suitcases and the basic knowledge of explosive device assembly, John and Mike built and installed plastic buckets full of resistance leaflets at three train stations. Topped with 'state of the art' non interference devices – plastic snakes, spiders, 'do not touch' warning signs – the small explosive charge was set to detonate at rush hour, delivering the leaflets to outstretched hands as thousands of black workers made their way back to the townships on the outskirts of the city.

The recruits undertook clandestine intervention at a time when internal ANC resistance had been crushed. The impact of a device that hurled the words of a banned movement high into the air right under the noses of the secret police was manifold. Coordinated, covert operations such as these served as triumphs for the liberation struggle, sending shockwaves through the regime and boosting the morale of those struggling under apartheid.

The UCU has a rich history of intervention in response to the economic, social and political freedoms of disenfranchised global counterparts. In recent times, UCU solidarity with Palestinians has born fruit via numerous motions and frameworks and John, a lifelong campaigner and academic, speaks of the similarities between the two respective struggles.

"Returning to South Africa to teach about Israel Palestine made me particularly aware of the comparisons between the earlier black struggle for liberation against the Apartheid state and the Palestinian struggle for liberation.' John recalls. 'In post Apartheid South Africa, full democratic rights exist for all the peoples living there. Similarly, in the land currently contested between Israel and Palestine, it should be possible to find a just and democratic solution for all the people living there, including of course those Palestinians who became refugees in the last century."

In 1970, John referred his cousin Katherine Levine (now Katherine Salahi) to Ronnie. A future UCU member and member of the Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM) from just 14 years old, Katherine flew to Lusaka in January 1971 with fellow recruit Laurence Harris. Posing as a honeymoon couple, for three months they smuggled weapons and ANC guerrillas down to the South African border in support of the ANC's armed wing Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK). In Katherine's account of her mission she emphasises the difficulty of maintaining her undercover presence and the masquerade of appearing complicit with a brutal system of racial discrimination and the individuals that sustained it. Remembering one encounter, Katherine recalls that 'his assumption that we would obviously agree with his vile opinions served to provide me with a sharp daily reminder of the grossness of apartheid, and probably helped to firm my resolve to complete our mission in support of Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK).'

A multitude of women and men signed up, idealists and internationalists from all walks of life eager to lend an extra pair of hands to keep the message of freedom burning bright. In 1973 Joy Leman, ATTI and NATFHE member, was tasked with the transportation, printing and distribution of ANC leaflets. Alongside fellow recruit John O'Malley, Joy garnered the raw materials inside South Africa - a second hand Gestetner duplicator, reams of paper, ink, stencils, latex gloves, envelopes and a portable typewriter - and established a printing press hidden from the regime within the walls of their hotel room. Past NATFHE member Ted Parker, deployed 'leaflet bombs', propaganda banners in strategic city locations with one such banner dramatically unfurling from the very top of the City Treasurer's Department in Johannesburg. As Ted recalls, 'one of the most prominent buildings in town.'

It is important to note that none of the recruits wish to overstate their role in a struggle in which many gave their lives. But these stories offer a timely and inspiring reminder that we all have an ability to shape a better and more just world. George Bridges, past NATFHE member and the first recruiter located by Ronnie, used his position as YCL London district secretary to draft in fellow comrades to the operation. 'It seemed like nothing when you saw the gallows ropes, the solitary confinement cells, the memorial to thousands of MK soldiers and the obscene activities of the apartheid regime,' says George, presenting a common thread that binds together each of the recruits' individual stories. 'However on reflection I feel proud that our relatively small organisation of idealistic young people, none of whom refused to volunteer, played an important part in the downfall of apartheid. Our slogan was always 'One Race; the Human Race.'