

DEATH OF A REVOLUTIONARY FRANK GLASS/LI FU-JEN/ JOHN LIANG 1901-1988

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Frank Glass, revolutionary activist, writer and scholar, died in Los Angeles on 21 March 1988, four days before his 87th birthday. Better known to international audiences as Li Fu-jen, or John Liang, he worked on three continents, and in each one was a central revolutionary figure. He was a foundation member of the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA); a member of the Executive of the Communist League in China; and on the editorial board of the *Militant*, the premier Trotskyist paper in the USA. Always a revolutionary, he lived three full lives; as pioneer and militant in South Africa; as publicist and organizer in China; and as writer and teacher in America.

Frank Glass, a founder of the CPSA is barely remembered in South Africa, having been largely ignored, if not expunged, from the histories of the working class movement. Yet during his stay in South Africa (having arrived as a boy in 1911) he played a leading role in the foundation and organization of the CPSA and then in the first black trade union in the country, the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union of Africa, or ICU. One of the first revolutionaries in South Africa to join the ranks of the left opposition, he went to China in 1930 and from 1933 worked with the Communist League of China (Trotskyist).

Frank Glass preferred not to talk about himself, claiming that his own personal doings were not relevant to an understanding of the workers' struggle. Yet Glass was the youngest delegate at the conference in 1921 at which it was decided to launch the CPSA, he served on the Central Executive, and was assistant secretary and acting editor of its paper, before he left the party. Nonetheless, he is largely ignored in Stalinist accounts, or presented in the worst possible light. Even the factors that led to his resignation are fudged, and this conceals a little known episode in the history of the communist movement.

Like many early pioneers, and not a few who followed, Glass had to make difficult decisions on the nature of the working class in South Africa, and following from this, had to decide on where best a revolutionary could work in South Africa. In the

process he made mistakes, and he erred with most early socialists on several issues. But they pale into insignificance when balanced against his achievements, and in presenting this appraisal I think he would have preferred to have the record as it was, and not sanitised to make him a superman. Frank Glass was a revolutionary, and worked through the problems he faced, making corrections as he proceeded. We can agree or disagree with his conclusions, but can only admire the revolutionary zeal with which he tackled each new problem.

Glass was a member of the Industrial Socialist League (InSL) in Cape Town (c.1918), a group which published the *Bolshevik*, and the first to adopt the name Communist Party of South Africa. The InSL called for the class struggle, the complete overthrow of capitalism, the dictatorship of the proletariat, a soviet system, affiliation to the Communist International, and mass action by the workers as a means of seizing power. The InSL established close links with the Johannesburg based International Socialist League (ISL), led by David Ivon Jones, S.P. Bunting and W.H. Andrews, but opposed participation in electoral politics. In this they found allies in Johannesburg, with whom to launch their communist party. The InSL, like the ISL, was non-racist, and called for the organization of all workers in one unified movement.

After a period of negotiations, several groups agreed to accept the 21 points of the Communist International and joined together to form the United Communist Party of South Africa. Frank Glass and four others could not accept the provision that the party participate in political (i.e. electoral) activity, and broke away to form the Communist Propaganda Group in April 1921. This was still a hangover from the strong syndicalist tendency of the pre-war days, and was not at that time based on opposition to participation in all-white government institutions. That decision to boycott such bodies only emerged in South Africa during the early 1940s, and was accepted then mainly by groups that had some connection with the Trotskyist movement.

In May 1921, 190 Israelites, (the name chosen by a chiliastic black church group) were massacred by troops at Bulhoek, near Queenstown in the eastern Cape. It was an unpardonable action perpetrated by the Smuts government, and when four members of the United CPSA protested, and were arrested and charged. members of the Propaganda Group showed their solidarity by participating in joint meetings and dissolving their group. In

August 1921 the small groups merged to form the official Communist Party of South Africa, and Frank was one of the four Cape delegates at the conference.

Frank Glass soon emerged as a leading member of the CPSA, and was secretary of the Cape Town branch in 1922. That was the year of the miners' strike on the Witwatersrand, which erupted into revolt and only ended when Smuts used aeroplanes to bomb the main mining areas. Caught in the dilemma of supporting workers who were in conflict with the mineowners, and the anti-black action of a sizable section of the white working class, he sided with the majority (near-unanimous) view of the party which claimed that the miners were striking in defense of living standards and not for the colour bar. This was a concession to racism by the CPSA and Glass erred with the party.

The rightward swing in the CPSA was extended when the party, in conformity with Comintern policy, accepted the need for the United Front tactic, and in 1923 applied for affiliation to the South African Labour Party (SALP). This went counter to the early principles on which the ISL had been based, particularly as the SALP was an exclusively white party, which prided itself on being the first to have called for the complete segregation of the country, the repatriation of all Africans to the Reserves and of Indians to the Indian continent. Although rejected in 1923, the issue was raised again inside the CPSA in December 1924, although by this time the Labour Party was allied with the Nationalist Party in the Pact Government. Frank, now a full time organizer in the CPSA, and its business administrator, was the main spokesman in favour of renewing the application to affiliate. He was reported in the *Star* (26 February 1925) as saying that:

I believe that the Communist Party in South Africa as in other English speaking countries is faced with two alternatives — either it must become an integral part of the whole labour movement . . . or remain a small propaganda sect, isolated and possessing no decisive vote.

This time the resolution was narrowly defeated and Frank Glass resigned from the executive committee of the party.

There appears to be three factors that led to the application to join the SALP. Firstly, there was Lenin's advice to the British

communists that they should affiliate to the Labour Party, in order to win the organised working class away from the social democrats. The small communist parties in Australia, South Africa and possibly elsewhere, discussed the issue, and the CPSA opted for the tactic. W.H. Andrews and Glass based their argument on Lenin's advice when they spoke at the CPSA conference in 1924. Secondly, the small groups were isolated, and this was particularly the case in South Africa after the disastrous conclusion of the mineworkers' strike of 1922. Everyone in the CPSA recognised this, and it led many of them to support the vote for affiliation. A third factor that reinforced this thinking came from the letter written by Ivon Jones, dying in a sanatorium in Yalta, to W.H. Andrews. In this letter Jones suggested that the CPSA be dissolved temporarily and that communists regain their position among workers via the trade unions. Meanwhile, a nucleus should publish a journal and through this protect the interests of the black workers. He also urged the South African communists to establish a book shop. Jones's advice seems to have been followed by Glass, and this is borne out in one of his last reminiscences just a few weeks before his death. In answer to questions I asked in a letter, Glass said that he could remember little of the events in South Africa, and then remarked on the fact that Andrews used to read Jones's letters to him, and these were always filled with optimism over the future of socialism.

In March 1924, on the second anniversary of the general strike, Glass wrote in the *International*, saying that the revolt would ever be remembered as one of the most glorious episodes in the proletarian struggle in South Africa, if not, indeed, of the world. It is indelibly stamped on the pages of universal working-class history as is, for instance, the Paris Commune of the year 1871. As with the Paris workers in that year, so in 1922 did the workers of this country receive their first real baptism of fire and blood.

Thus far his article on the strike echoed many of the views expressed by Jones, who said in an appraisal (*Communist International*, 1922) that the strike was 'the first great armed revolt of the workers on any scale in the British Empire'. Jones went further, voicing criticism of the racist attacks on blacks, but claiming that these were isolated events and exaggerated by the press. Glass said nothing on this issue, but claimed that 'Alone of all Labour organisations, the Communist Party

justified and defended the heroic workers of the Rand', and he contrasted this with the Labourite and trade union leaders who dissociated themselves from the events of March 1922, and said, "You shouldn't have gone so far".

Andrews and Glass withdrew from the Central Executive in December 1924, but it is not known whether they formally resigned from the CPSA. Both the Simons and Roux (in his biography of Bunting, p.68) say that Glass left the CPSA. Furthermore according to Roux, Glass left the party immediately after the conference, and then made a statement during an interview to the *Star* that Africans could not appreciate the noble ideas of communism. I searched through the *Star* to find this interview, but could not find it. However, there was a letter signed by Roux, as General Secretary of the CPSA, on 4 March 1925, written in response to press reports. He said that neither Andrews nor Glass had left the party, and that Glass had resigned as treasurer because of pressure of trade union work. It is possible that this letter was itself only a half-truth, to cover an uncomfortable position, but Roux's subsequent ascription of racist statements to Glass seem to be less than a half-truth.

After the December conference many members of the CPSA drifted away and were not heard of again. But Glass was secretary of the Witwatersrand Tailors' Association and together with Andrews played a prominent part in the white trade union movement. On 27 March the *Star*, claiming that the communists had captured control of the trade union movement, carried the news that Andrews had been elected secretary, and Glass treasurer, of the trade union federation, the S.A. Association of Employees' Organizations.

Frank Glass's subsequent political activities are not clear. He might have joined the SALP (which communists were allowed to do, on an individual basis). However, he would have been isolated there after the events at the March trade union conference. Creswell, the SALP leader and Minister of Labour in the Nationalist-Labour Pact government, sought support for his Wages Bill and his proposed Emergency Powers Bill at the assembly. Glass moved the motion repudiating the latter, and only an amendment to postpone the introduction of the legislation for a year, which got overwhelming support, stopped the complete rejection of the Bill.

It was at this conference that Fanny Klenerman made her mark for the second time that year. She had already achieved some notoriety in the conservative press, for moving a resolution at the SALP conference in December 1924, calling for the restructuring of the Defence Force on democratic lines (*Star* editorials, 5 January, 13 January). She raised the issue again at the trade union conference in March, and only because she was persuaded to withdraw the motion, to save many delegates the embarrassment of voting on the issue, was the matter dropped. If Frank Glass and Fanny Klenerman had not known of each other previously, they were bound to have noticed each other here. Within twenty months they were to be married.

Both Frank and Fanny were fully occupied with trade union work, Fanny with the South African Woman Workers Union, comprising sweetworkers, waitresses and other women workers. She also joined the CPSA at some stage, but seemed to have been an opposition voice almost from the beginning. Frank never resumed active work in the party, but we know that he moved from a position of leadership in the white trade unions to a precarious position in the major African trade union movement — the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union of Africa. In September 1925 he and Andrews appeared on an ICU platform, and successfully called for support for the British seamen who had walked off the ships in protest against a wage cut. This appears to have been the prelude to a change in Frank Glass's appraisal of the working class in South Africa.

The industrialization of South Africa had barely begun in the early 1920s when the ICU was launched. After participating in a dock strike the new union spread out, to become a broad general workers union under Clements Kadalie, with a claimed enrolment of 150,000. Members were recruited mainly in the African townships and also in the countryside. Many of its organizers joined the CPSA and party leaders (including Bunting) spoke at its meetings. At the end of 1926 the communists were arbitrarily expelled, and although the reasons are still unclear, it seems that this was partly because the ICU leadership feared an impending criticisms of financial irregularities, and partly because white liberals exerted pressure on the leaders to remove all communists from office. ICU leaders were also accused by members of the CPSA of resorting to crude racism in their attacks on the white communists. The ICU leaders' counter-claim was that

communists were overbearing and were prying into the internal affairs of the organization.

It consequently came as a surprise when Glass (later the liberal's *bête noire*) was asked to audit the union's accounts, and prepare a financial statement, as required by the Department of Labour. Kadalie also wanted Glass appointed as financial secretary of the ICU, but because of opposition to a white occupying the post, he was only appointed in a temporary capacity until an English adviser (himself obviously white) arrived. It has also been suggested that Glass was not appointed because of liberal pressure. History is not made of ifs and ands, but had he secured this post in the ICU, the history of black worker's organization might have taken a different turn, and Glass might not have gone to China.

On 28 March 1927 Frank Glass, together with W.H.Andrews, spoke at an ICU meeting in Johannesburg, called to protest against the new Native Administration Act, which provided the legislation that could cripple all black organization. The newspaper report placed the audience at some 2,000 Africans, and a small group of whites, Indians, and Chinese. Glass's address was reported by the police as being potentially illegal, and there was a storm when the matter was raised in the South African parliament. We only have a newspaper report (in the *Rand Daily Mail*, 28 March 1927) of what he said, but it is enough to show why his words were so bitterly denounced:

If you will do what the Russian workers have done and what the Chinese workers are doing now you — all the workers of this country, black and white — will be able to secure freedom. We don't know at the moment how far the Government is going in its attempt to restrict the freedom of the Native workers; but this we do know, that all capitalist governments in their dealings with the workers act precisely alike. Therefore we have got to be prepared, not merely with demonstrations, but also — if it proves to be necessary — with far more drastic action.

It also seems most likely that the remarkable introduction to the ICU Economic and Political Program for 1928 was written by Glass. Nobody else could have phrased it so cogently:

Opponents of the ICU have frequently asserted that the Organization is not a trade union in the sense that the term is generally understood in South Africa, but that it is a kind of pseudo-political body...The new constitution...definitely establishes the ICU as a trade union, albeit one of native workers...at the same time it must be clearly understood that we have no intention of copying the stupid and futile 'non-political' attitude of our white contemporaries. As Karl Marx said, every economic question is, in the last analysis, a political question also, and we must recognise that in neglecting to concern ourselves with current politics, in leaving the political machine to the unchallenged control of our class enemies, we are rendering a disservice to those tens of thousands of our members who are groaning under oppressive laws... At the present stage of our development it is inevitable that our activities should be almost of an agitational character, for we are not recognised as citizens in our own country, being almost entirely disfranchised and debarred from exercising a say in state affairs closely affecting our lives and welfare.

In January 1927 Frank and Fanny were married. Fanny organized literacy classes ran for the ICU, and worked inside the CPSA. As she stated later, work inside the party became increasingly difficult, partly because of criticism that were raised at party meetings of events in the USSR — based on the writings of Trotsky that were becoming available. The marriage seems to have foundered, and stories suggest that neither partner was prepared to make concessions for the other. But there were also material difficulties. The couple was always short of money, and work was hard to find in the depression years. Fanny taught English (mainly to Russian immigrants) and Frank worked as a journalist. They even took over a small tearoom (which Fanny managed) and then Frank opened a bookshop, selling socialist and radical books.

Frank Glass moved to the ranks of the left opposition in 1928 when he read of the expulsion of James Cannon from the American CP. He was one of the first Marxists to support Trotsky in South Africa, and the first to write a letter of support to the American oppositionist paper, the *Militant*, of 29 March 1930. In that letter he provided a brief overview for those who knew little about South Africa, of the racism that divided the

country and the working class. White workers would not work with blacks in certain jobs and excluded them from their trade unions. The high wages of whites, he said, were possible because of the low wages paid to black workers, and he added that blacks had started organising their own trade unions.

Glass wrote about the Comintern's theory of the 'third period' in which all communist parties were directed to prepare for the revolutionary overturn of their own governments, and the instruction to the CPSA that it implement a 'Black Republic' slogan. Debates on this slogan are still met in South Africa today, and Glass's objections are not necessarily acceptable. In fact the editors of the *Militant* made that comment in 1930 when they printed his letter. Glass's objected particularly to the removal of the slogan for a 'Workers and Peasants Republic' and the substitution of the slogan for a 'Native Republic'. The consequence, he said, was that:

Racial animosity on the part of the native [black] members towards the European members has grown and is developing to an almost incredible degree, the native members logically interpreting the slogan as implying superiority for themselves over the hated oppressor (white Communists are included here).

He said that there had been a 'wholesale desertion of the white proletarian members who would not subscribe to the abandonment of the Marxian slogan "Workers of all lands, unite!"' and also that 'Many native workers have been won to this new policy, but at the price of the relinquishment of Marxism and the adoption of petty bourgeois slogans'.

The Glasses were isolated politically, and although there were others who agreed with them, they did not establish a group in South Africa. It was only two years later, on 4 June 1932, that a letter from 'four Africans' in the Transvaal, signed by T.W. Thibedi, appeared in the *Militant*, supporting the left opposition. But that grouping seems to have collapsed. There was more success in Cape Town, where small groups finally established a Lenin Club, from which viable organizations were built. Among the persons involved were veteran members of the CPSA, including Joe Pick and Manuel Lopes, who were friends of Frank Glass. However, details are not readily available: none to indicate what happened to Glass's connections with the

ICU, or within the CPSA. Fanny Glass, who remained in the CPSA, was expelled with other dissidents (including Bunting and Andrews) in 1931. Thereafter Fanny worked with members of the left opposition, but Bunting and Andrews did not make the crucial break with Stalinism. Bunting died in May 1936, and the latter returned to the CPSA in 1938, and became its war-time chairman.

Fanny took over and extended the bookshop after Frank left South Africa in 1930, and renamed it the Vanguard Booksellers. It became a centre for all students seeking works on fascism, on Russia, Spain, and China, and on the coming world war. In any serious attempt to dissect out the factors informing political ideas in the 1930s in Johannesburg, the story of the Vanguard bookshop would have to be included, more particularly in the late 1930s and through the war years. It was there, in cramped premises (before the shop expanded and moved across the road) that Marxists mixed with trade unionists; students with activists; radicals rubbed shoulders with liberals; rationalists confronted scientists; and those behind the counter (many of them associated with the left) assisted in the search for the latest works on contemporary events, or provided their own critical assessment of the works on hand. This was more than a shop — it was a forum for informed political ideas, and also for the latest currents in philosophy, literature, and art.

And yet, this being South Africa, the men and women who filled the shop were almost all white. Most of the blacks seen in the shop were the shelvers and delivery men who were housed in an upstairs store-room, and only came down to replenish the stocks. The room upstairs has its own story, much of it still untold. Those who worked there were invariably men of talent, who dreamt of the possibility of writing, or of composing, but with few outlets for their creativity. They worked at the Vanguard, where at least their wages were above average, and they had access to the books on the shelves, but they lacked opportunity for advancement. Only in the post-war years, when journals like *Drum* were launched, did some of them escape the tedium of carrying or delivering books, and find a niche in the world of journalism. Among the shelvers were Todd Matshikiza, who later wrote the lyrics for the musical show *King Kong*, in which Miriam Makeba starred; and Bloke Modisane whose book *Blame Me on History* was published after he managed to leave the country.

The history of the left groups in the Transvaal during the 1930s is still uncharted. During the war, Trotskyists in Johannesburg knew that Fanny had been married, but all they knew of Glass was that he had gone to China, had been involved there in the work of the Trotskyist group, and they suspected, correctly, wrote under the name of Li Fu-jen. His articles were read in the journals that came through to Johannesburg, and he assumed legendary proportions to young comrades as 'the revolutionary who had gone to China'.

Now, after Glass's death, information is becoming available about his remarkable career. It appears that Frank Glass was assigned to the east (possibly in 1930) by a London newspaper or news agency. He was refused permission to enter Japan, and went to Shanghai. In China he met with the American journalist Harold Isaacs, and together they saw the brutal executions of suspected communists by the Kuomintang more than three years after the Shanghai blood bath of 1927, and the extermination of most of the Chinese communist party. Glass recruited Isaacs to the Trotskyist movement, and provided some of the ideas incorporated in the first (and only authentic) edition of Isaacs' classic *Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution*. This still stands as the most remarkable book written around the events of 1927, and remains a permanent indictment of Stalinist policy in China. The book was the main source of information for several decades on events leading to the near extermination of the Chinese communist party, and the annihilation of large sections of the Chinese working class.

Glass worked briefly for the Soviet Tass news agency in China, but quit '... because of the meaningless content of Tass news'. He then worked as a correspondent for the Anglo-Asiatic Telegraphic Agency. For the remainder of the 1930s Glass worked for several newspapers, edited the *China Weekly Review*, was a political commentator on radio, and worked with the Chinese Trotskyists in Shanghai from 1933. Wang Fan-hsi, in his memoirs, states that at first the Chinese groups were highly suspicious of Glass, as they were of all whites, because of the way the Chinese Communist Party had been manipulated by representatives of the Communist International. Called the 'hairy ones', all whites were kept at arms length. Glass persisted, and must have learnt an invaluable lesson on ethnic relations in the process. But once accepted he played an important part in restoring and maintaining the group's

underground organization, and was elected to the Provisional Central Committee of the Communist League of China (Trotskyists) in late 1935.

Glass now entered the select group that worked with Trotsky, visited him in 1937, and discussed some of the programmatic problems of the Chinese section of the Fourth International. It is said that he also edited some of Trotsky's English articles. He returned to China, where he lived in the Shanghai French Concession. He was active in revolutionary politics, and several daring exploits are ascribed to him during his stay in Shanghai, but he was compelled to maintain a low profile, fearing betrayal and persecution from the Stalinists, the French Concession police, and Kuomintang agents. He fled Shanghai shortly before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour (7 December 1941) and the Japanese occupation of Shanghai. Taking a circuitous and dangerous route he returned to New York, and later established a home with Grace Simons in Los Angeles.

In the USA Frank Glass was on the editorial board of the *Militant* for many years; was a member of the National Committee of the (American) Socialist Workers Party, a position he held from 1944 till 1963. During this time, unable to formally belong to any organization, he maintained his political position. He wrote under a number of pseudonyms, but he was best known for the articles he wrote under the name Li Fu-jen, and was much sought after as the outstanding authority on events in China. In the last period of his political activity he published a Filipino community paper *Laging Uno*, which circulated in California among farm workers and others. It carried articles on opposition to the Marcos regime, and on local problems faced by this minority community.

A serious appraisal of Frank Glass's writings will be the most appropriate memorial for a man who devoted so much of his life to the overthrow of capitalism in three continents.

There the account must rest for now. He was a living legend for many of us: we must not allow his memory to die.

Bibliographical Note

The more easily accessible sources in which Frank Glass is mentioned in the South African context are: Sheridan Johns, 'The Birth of the Communist Party of South Africa', *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, IX, 2, 1976;

P.L. Wickens, *The Industrial and Commercial Workers Union*, OUP, Cape Town, 1978; H.J. and R.E. Simons, *Class and Colour in South Africa, 1850-1950*, Penguin, 1969; Edward Roux, *S.P. Bunting, A Political Biography*, Cape Town, 1944. I have found errors in some of the secondary literature, and have tried to use only material that is verifiable, but new material might reveal that further corrections are needed.

In compiling this brief account I am indebted to Suzi Weissman who read Frank Glass my letter, and was able to elicit a few invaluable comments on events in South Africa. After the first draft of this article was completed, I was shown an unpublished memoir dictated at the age of 84 years by Fanny Klenerman, shortly before her death in Johannesburg. This gave me some insight into Glass's personal life, which is now incorporated in the text. For this, I wish to thank Rose Zvi, who had the original tapes. The account by Fanny, recorded over fifty years after their separation, is still tinged with bitterness. But the relationship must have had a brighter side: a copy of *Five Years of Kuomintang Reaction* edited by Harold Isaacs (Shanghai, May 1932) in my possession, has an inscription on the flyleaf saying: 'Fanny, from Frank, as a small token of affection. Shanghai, June 1932'.

A chance meeting with Sheridan Johns in London just before this account was completed led to information on his sources. He had found the minute book of an early Cape Town group to which Glass belonged. Fanny Klenerman's tapes reveal that she had handed these to S.A. Rochlin, antiquarian, and one time member of the Young Communist League, for safekeeping. Johns had access to the papers when researching the early history of the CPSA. They were later handed, presumably by a relative of Rochlin, to the library of Concordia University, Montreal. Thanks to the efforts of Judy Appleby at the library, a copy has been received for further research.

The note on the Vanguard bookshop, and its storeroom upstairs is recounted from memory. I knew Fanny, both politically and socially, and was allowed access to the store, where I spent many hours discussing political issues with the men who worked there.

The account of Frank Glass's life after he left South Africa is taken from an obituary compiled by Milton Alvin in *Socialist Action*, May 1988; an article by Harry Ring in *Militant* of 6 May; and an obituary by Wang Fanxi (Fan-hsi) in

International Viewpoint, 16 May. There are references to Frank Glass/Li Fu-jen in Wang Fan-hsi, *Chinese Revolutionary, Memoirs 1919-49*, and Harold Isaacs, *China Reconsidered*. My thanks to Alex Buchman who sent me comments and material on this period, and photographs of Glass, and to Wang Fan-hsi, with whom Frank worked in China, for responding to a first draft of this obituary, and correcting errors of fact. No attempt has been made here to include reference to, or write critically of, the many articles Glass wrote on China and Japan under the pseudonyms Li Fu-jen, and John Liang, and it has been variously suggested, the names Frank Graves and/or Ralph Graham.