

South African History Online lives of courage series

Alex Hepple: South African Socialist

A Memoir by Bob Hepple

# South African History Online lives of courage series

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Cover Photograph: Cartoon by Ashton in *Saamtrek, 'Met die Vlag Omhoog'*, after the ascent of Everest in 1953, portraying Labour as holding the flag of the freedom of the worker against economic exploitation and interference with human rights.

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## In Memory of My Parents

*Say not the struggle naught availeth,  
The labour and the wounds are vain,  
The enemy faints not, nor faileth,  
And as things have been they remain.*

*If hopes were dupes, fears may be liars;  
It may be, in your smoke conceal'd,  
Your comrades chase e'en now the fliers,  
And, but for you, possess the field.*

*For while the tired waves, vainly breaking,  
Seem here no painful inch to gain,  
Far back, through creeks and inlets making,  
Comes silent, flooding in the main.*

*And not by eastern windows only,  
When daylight comes, comes in the light;  
In front, the sun climbs slow, how slowly!  
But westward, look, the land is bright!*

*(Arthur Hugh Clough)*



Photo: Eli Weinberg

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I am grateful to my friend Norman Levy for suggesting many years ago that I should write this book, and to Omar Badsha for his encouragement and support in publishing it as part of his enterprising venture to awaken the interest of the 'born free' generation of South Africans in their history. I have benefited from the comments on an early draft by my life-long friend Joan Shall and members of my family. My grandson, Peter Henson, helped with the editing. The book could not have been written without the volumes of Alex's collected writings and speeches pasted up and bound by my mother, and the files of correspondence and other materials which she preserved.

I express my thanks for their assistance with sources to Rachel Rowe, Smuts Librarian for South Asian and Commonwealth studies in the University of Cambridge library, and to Geraldine Frieslaar, archivist at the Mayibuye/Robben Island Archive, University of the Western Cape.

Bob Hepple, Clare College, Cambridge, June 2011.

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## Introduction

*By the steps I have cut they will climb: by the stairs that I have built they will mount. They will never know the name of the man who made them. At the clumsy work they will laugh; when the stones roll they will curse me. But they will mount and on my work; they will climb and by my stair.*

*(Olive Schreiner)*

### A life for our times

My parents, Alex and Girlie Hepple, were democratic socialists who devoted much of their lives trying to persuade white South Africans that their long-term interests lay in equality for all races and in social solidarity. They failed in this mission at the time: the majority of the white population chose to support apartheid and white *baasskap*.<sup>1</sup> This failure did not lead my parents to give up the struggle. Alex, who became Leader of the South African Labour Party (SALP), was the voice of the voteless majority in parliament, at every turn campaigning for democracy and human rights in an increasingly totalitarian state. He courageously spoke truth to power as a parliamentarian, journalist and public figure. He gave unstinting advice and support to attempts to create a non-racial trade union movement, and he played a leading role in supporting the victims of political repression as chair of the Treason Trial Defence Fund and the South African Defence and Aid Fund. Following the closure of the Labour newspaper *Forward*, which he and Girlie had refounded, they went into exile in Britain and there started the International Defence and Aid Fund's Information Service which helped to expose to the rest of the world the evils of apartheid and repression in South Africa.

Alex's role was much appreciated by leaders of the African National Congress (ANC) and its allies. In his autobiography, Nelson Mandela acknowledges Alex's support;<sup>2</sup> in a personal letter, shortly before he was sentenced to life imprisonment in the Rivonia Trial in 1964, Walter Sisulu said my parents were 'personal friends' to some of the accused and were held 'in very high esteem' by them.<sup>3</sup> The liberal press described Alex as a 'brilliant parliamentarian [who is] admired by both sides of the House for the battle he wages on behalf of South Africa's workers white and black',<sup>4</sup> and as 'the militant champion who always spoke up for the underprivileged and for social justice'.<sup>5</sup> When Alex died in 1983, Alfred Nzo, Secretary-General of the ANC, wrote that 'Alex was known and loved by the oppressed people of South Africa for his opposition to

the draconian apartheid policies of the South African regime.<sup>6</sup> Phyllis Altman, former assistant general secretary of SACTU said 'we could not have achieved what we did in the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) without Alex.'<sup>7</sup> Trevor Huddleston, wrote that Alex "life was a never-ending struggle for justice and against discrimination. Those millions in South Africa who fight for liberation and independence knew him as a fellow fighter. His integrity and modesty and selfless dedication to the cause of justice will always be remembered."<sup>8</sup>

It may be a matter of surprise that, despite the recognition of their contribution by those who worked with Alex and Girlie, there has been no book about them or about the Labour Party. A recent history of white opposition to apartheid in the 1950s contains only passing reference to the Labour Party despite the fact that it had representatives in parliament until 1958.<sup>9</sup> Several whites who were prominent in the struggle against apartheid have been the subject of biographers, for example, Alan Paton, author and chair of the Liberal Party,<sup>10</sup> Bram Fischer, lawyer and chair of the underground Communist Party,<sup>11</sup> and those turbulent priests Trevor Huddleston<sup>12</sup> and Michael Scott.<sup>13</sup> Many not so prominent whites have written memoirs of their part in the struggle. But Alex was a modest man who was incapable of indulging in the self-justification and political and personal gossip that is a hallmark of most autobiographies. In his last years, he did write *The South African Labour Party 1908-58: a memoir*. Attempts made to interest book publishers in the 1980s and again in 2003 were unsuccessful. It has now been published by SA History Online ([www.sahistory.org.za](http://www.sahistory.org.za)).

I was led to write this memoir by the gap in the literature at a time of revival of interest in the early socialist and trade union movements in South Africa. It draws extensively on Alex's writings, speeches, and personal correspondence. This includes in particular his unpublished history of the Labour Party, his political and economic history of South Africa, his pamphlets, and his masterly biography of Dr Vewoerd. I was able to consult three volumes of his articles in journals and newspapers, and six volumes of his parliamentary speeches, all lovingly collected and bound by Girlie. I have also used other documents in the Alexander Hepple collection in the Royal Commonwealth Society library in Cambridge University and in the Mayibuye/Robben Island Archive at the University of the Western Cape (see Note on Sources). The quotations of poetry and prose that preface each chapter are taken from an anthology Alex compiled as a young man.

Needless to say, this is not an objective study by an independent scholar. I am Alex's and Girlie's only child, born in 1934 in their first home in Second Avenue, Bezuidenhout Valley, Johannesburg. I was wheeled in my pram and later walked on my own young

feet at countless Labour Party conferences and political demonstrations with my parents, participated in Alex's election campaigns that were meticulously organised by Girlie, and sat in awe in the parliamentary gallery as Alex delivered some of his most telling attacks on the Nationalist government. I treasured the days when we debated the big questions at the family dinner table, or I walked around the golf course or climbed Table Mountain with Alex. He had the gift of giving straight and uncomplicated explanations, and was patient with others less clear-sighted than himself. He was undemonstrative and had simple, conservative tastes, but as Mary Benson, the writer who was secretary of the Treason Trial Defence Fund, wrote 'a marvellous man – so lovable and so stimulating and such fun.'<sup>14</sup> Another friend wrote to Girlie 'we remember laughing such a lot with you and Alex about the strange turns that politics and people could take in South Africa – Alex's wit summed this up so often.'<sup>15</sup> This memoir is a personal account of the life and times of the father and mother whom I loved and admired.

## Outline

**Chapter One:** Class Struggles. The earliest influence in Alex Hepple's life was the struggles of the white working-class community into which he was born. He had vivid memories of the violent suppression of workers' demonstrations during the 1913 strike, when he was nine years' old, the arrest of strike leaders and the subsequent blacklisting by the employers of his father, a trade union activist. As an 18 year-old he experienced the Rand revolt of 1922, and witnessed some of the shootings in which over 200 workers were killed and 500 injured. This chapter describes the experiences of his parents, who were founding members of the South African Labour Party, and the formative experiences of his youth.

**Chapter Two:** the Socialist Objective. Alex's commitment to socialist ideas and his repulsion against fascism and all forms of dictatorship was the key to his political actions. His understanding of socialism was shaped by his working-class experience, his love of books by British socialist and radical writers, and the anti-fascist movement of the 1930s. What was unique in South Africa about Alex's socialism – shared by only a few other whites – was the conviction that socialism was not possible without full equality for all irrespective of race, gender or any other status. This chapter explains why he and Girlie, whom he married in 1931, chose to work for their ideals in the difficult and often unrewarding environment of the white Labour Party.

**Chapter Three:** Moving the Labour Party Towards Non-Racialism. Throughout its existence the Labour Party wrestled with the problem of finding a policy which would be acceptable to the whites and at the same time do justice to the blacks. The task was not made any easier by the Party's right-wing racialists and the conservatism of several affiliated trade unions, concerned with protecting their white members from cheap black competition. This chapter describes how, despite this, the socialist and progressive elements were able to introduce and preserve some liberal principles in regard to the voteless black majority. It also discusses the problems arising from the anti-Nationalist alliance with Smuts and the United Party.

**Chapter Four:** Voices for Democracy and Human Rights. When he took his seat in Parliament, Alex found himself becoming one of the most prominent speakers on the opposition benches. The United Party's irresolute posture meant that the small Labour group found it necessary to do the major work of tackling the Government. They offered an alternative: a move towards partnership with black South Africans, giving them franchise rights, full trade union rights, proper education and training, and equal opportunity. They were particularly powerful in debates on labour and industrial

## Outline

matters. This chapter gives an account of some the key parliamentary clashes in which Alex was involved, how he consistently raised the issues of democratic representation and human rights, in the face of a Nationalist barrage, why he refused offers to join the United Party or lead the Liberal Party, and ultimately lost his seat in 1958 as the white electorate moved even further to the right.

**Chapter Five:** Unity is Strength. Alex devoted much time and effort to helping build a non-racial trade union movement, and in opposing the industrial colour bar. This chapter describes his opposition to the Nationalist Broederbond attack on the unions, his struggles with the collaborationist white union leaders, his role as a key adviser to SACTU from the time of its formation, and his work with black union leaders many of whom were banned, imprisoned or forced into exile.

**Chapter Six:** Cry Out Aloud. The final chapter gives an account of Alex's and Girlie's work as defenders of victims of repression, through the Treason Trial Fund and the SA Defence and Aid Fund, and as propagandists against the apartheid regime through the Labour newspaper Forward until government repression forced its closure and led them to move in 1965 to England, where Alex continued as an author, journalist and speaker against apartheid and he and Girlie founded and ran the International Defence and Aid Fund (IDAF) Information Service until their retirement in 1972.

## Chapter 1: Class struggles

*The people's flag is deepest red,  
It shrouded oft our martyred dead  
And ere their limbs grew stiff and cold,  
Their hearts' blood dyed its ev'ry fold.*

*Then raise the scarlet standard high.  
Within its shade we'll live and die,  
Though cowards flinch and traitors sneer,  
We'll keep the red flag flying here.*

*(The Red Flag, Labour anthem)*

### Family history

The earliest influence in Alex Hepple's life was the struggles of the white working-class community into which he was born. He had vivid memories of the violent suppression of workers' demonstrations during the 1913 strike when he was nine years' old, the arrest of strike leaders and the subsequent blacklisting by the employers of his father, a trade union activist. As an 18 year-old he experienced the Rand revolt of 1922, and witnessed some of the shootings in which over 200 workers were killed and 500 injured. He joined the mourning following the execution of three strikers convicted of murder (Hull, Lewis and Long) who went to the gallows singing the 'Red Flag'.

The Hepples were a family of active trade unionists and socialists. They struggled against injustices which, in Alex's words, they regarded as part of 'the unending miseries of capitalist society'.<sup>16</sup> There was a contradiction between the beliefs of white workers in solidarity and their participation in the oppression and exploitation of black workers, most of whom were at the time semi-skilled or unskilled. Unfortunately most white 'socialists' were afflicted by the terrible curse of racialism. Their European origins and skin colour made the white workers a special kind of labour 'aristocracy'. Unlike skilled workers in Britain, they were defined not so much by their class but by their colour. While the labour 'aristocracy' of Britain benefited indirectly from the exploitation of colonial peoples, white South African workers were 'colonialists' who received direct benefits from the oppression of the 'native' races. This privileged status affected and corrupted every aspect of their lives. They could enter skilled occupations reserved by custom or law for whites and belong to trade unions and political parties that

defended the interests of the white population while neglecting those of the black majority. Their children went to whites-only schools, and they lived in areas that were socially segregated from the majority black population. As sons and daughters of the British Empire, they regarded the indigenous black population as 'lesser breeds'.

Most white socialists in South Africa denied the equality of all, irrespective of colour or race. They were determined and militant when it came to defending their own class interests against the rapacious mine owners and big business, but were bigoted racists in their attitudes to Coloured (mixed race), Asian, and African workers. This was not unique to white socialists in South Africa. Jack London, the socialist author of the *Iron Heel*, which prophesied the rise of fascism, saw socialism as a means 'to give more strength to...certain kindred favoured races so that they may survive and inherit the earth to the extinction of the lesser, weaker races.'<sup>17</sup> The basis of those ideas was a crude Darwinism that portrayed 'natural selection' and 'the survival of the fittest' as favouring the 'superior' white race. Although white Labourites purported to espouse the classic tenets of British socialism, they had no interest in sharing economic and political power with the black proletariat. Instead they sought solidarity with poor-white Afrikaners, who still had the deeply embedded racist attitudes of frontiersmen.<sup>18</sup>

Most white immigrants from Britain to South Africa were skilled craftsmen. This was a stratum of the working-class, generally better paid, better treated and regarded as more 'respectable' than the mass of semi-skilled and unskilled workers.<sup>19</sup> Alex never knew his grandparents. Thomas Hepple was born in 1849 in Belsay, eastern Northumberland. He moved to Sunderland, county Durham, where he became a skilled glassmaker working at Hartley's glassworks. It was near this factory, that he and his wife Margaret Hutchinson (born in Sunderland in 1852) set up their home, in which Alex's father, Tom, was born on 26 June 1869. The house was one of a long row of terraced cottages in a cobblestoned street which, at least until the 1970s, was still occupied by workers employed in the modern glassworks, owned by the Pyrex group.

The 1891 census shows the family as having grown to eight sons, two daughters, and a son-in-law. Three of Tom's younger brothers were killed in action during the 1914-18 War. At the age of 12, Tom was apprenticed as a patternmaker at Doxfords shipbuilders, for which his parents had to pay a premium to his employers. Patternmakers, who planned, laid out and constructed the unit- or sectional patterns used in forming sand moulds for castings according to blueprint specifications, were generally regarded as being elite craftsmen, and had to serve a seven-year apprenticeship rather than the five years normal for other crafts. After completing his apprenticeship and becoming qualified as a journeyman patternmaker, Tom served an improvership of about six

months at another dockyard and then obtained work as a journeyman at Hartlepool shipyards. Unfortunately, the shipbuilding and engineering industries were then running into bad times and increasing numbers of skilled craftsmen were falling out of work.

The twist in this otherwise unremarkable working-class family story is that Tom, believing that there was no future for him in England, decided to emigrate and became, by virtue of his European descent, a member of the white labour aristocracy in South Africa. The discovery of gold in 1886 on the Witwatersrand (white water ridge) in the Boer South African Republic brought great stories of opportunities for adventurous skilled workers in developing the gold mines. He arrived in Johannesburg, still mainly a mining camp, in 1893 to find that engineering had not yet reached the stage to employ patternmakers. He therefore took the next best thing, work as a carpenter on a mine at Brakpan on the eastern Rand. Later, when the firm of EW Terry & Co established an engineering works, he was glad to be able to return to his own trade.

He met and married Agnes Borland in Johannesburg in 1896. She, too, was a Rand pioneer. She was born on the farm Mielietuin (Maize Garden) on the banks of the Little Tugela river, in Weenen county, Natal on 26 October 1871. Her father, Alexander Borland, was born in 1837 in Ayrshire, Scotland. At the age of 17, soon after completing his apprenticeship as a blacksmith and farrier, he went to South Africa as one of the British artisan settlers whom the British government were encouraging to emigrate to the colonies because of unemployment and poverty throughout the British Isles. After a short spell in the Eastern Cape, Alexander Borland moved to Natal in 1855. There he met and married Marie Theresa Coyle, the daughter of Irish parents, born in 1840 in County Cork, Ireland. The Coyle family had left Ireland during the potato famine of the 1840s in which millions of Irish people perished through hunger. They went to Cowes, Isle of Wight, and from there emigrated to South Africa, where Marie Theresa's father was posted as one of the first contingent of British troops sent to Natal to strengthen the colony. The family arrived in Pietermaritzburg in 1850 and were stationed at Fort Napier, the military establishment outside the town. Pietermaritzburg was named after Boer trekkers who were killed nearby by Zulus who called this Umgungundhlovu – 'place of the elephant'.

After their marriage in 1862, Alexander and Marie Theresa moved to Weenen, about 70 miles north-east of Pietermaritzburg, where they farmed and ran a small blacksmith shop, repairing wagons and shoeing horses for farmers from many miles around. These farmers were mainly Voortrekker families who had trekked from the Cape in

## Family history

the 1830s to get away from British rule and in protest against the freeing of slaves. Eventually Alexander and Marie Theresa became anxious about the education of their twelve children, there being no school or teachers in the vicinity, so they returned to Pietermaritzburg and sent their children of schoolgoing age to the Roman Catholic convent. Agnes was seven years old when the Zulus destroyed the British force of 1,800 men at Isandhlwana, about 80 miles from Pietermaritzburg. Her father was called to arms as a member of the voluntary Maritzburg rifles, but in the event the Zulus were held up by a small force of British soldiers at Rorke's Drift. Pietermaritzburg was a small dull place with few prospects for a bright young woman - even many years later, the writer Tom Sharpe could describe Pietermaritzburg as 'half the size of a New York cemetery and twice as dead.' Not surprisingly, aged about 20, Agnes sought the adventure and dangers of the new mining settlement around Johannesburg, where she went to live with an aunt.

The first two years of Tom and Agnes' marriage were clouded by the loss of two infants. Tom was one of the *uitlanders* (foreigners), who were drilled on Saturdays in the closed yard of his employer's premises with a view to participating in the revolt planned by Rhodes and Chamberlain so that they could take control of the Boer Republic. These preparations ended in fiasco with the abortive Jameson Raid in December 1895, without Tom ever being called to arms. In 1898 Tom and Agnes left Johannesburg to pay a visit to Tom's family in Sunderland. They thought it best to remain in England for the duration of the Boer War (1899-1902), and while there Alex's elder sister, Rita, was born. They returned to Johannesburg only at the war's end.



The Hepple family in 1951. Front (l to r): Rita (Marshall) b 1901; Mother (Agnes Borland (1871-1960)). Back (l to r): George Bernard b 1910; Edward (Ned) b 1908; Alexander b 1904; Thomas (Tommy) b 1903. Their father was Thomas Hepple (1869-1944).

## Alex's early years

Alex was the third of five children who survived infancy. He was born on 28 August 1904 in a small wood and iron house in the southern Johannesburg suburb of La Rochelle. This was later part of the Rosettenville constituency which he represented in Parliament from 1948-58. The suburb was inhabited by white working-class people, most of the men working in the gold mines, others for engineering works or the state railways. There were hardly any Afrikaner families in the area, and the few who were there had been anglicised. The eastern and southern suburbs of Johannesburg were something like a small industrial town in England, although not as crowded. Most people regarded Britain as 'home'. They kept in touch with their mother country by correspondence, and by avidly reading English newspapers and magazines that arrived each week by mail boat from Britain. These close ties with 'home' made the community very British and patriotic to the Crown, long after the establishment of the Union of South Africa in 1910. The Sons of England, the Caledonian Society and other British organisations flourished. Politically, most English-speaking workers were Labour, although not a few supported the Unionists, the jingo party which represented the interests of the mine owners and big business.

Alex went to the local Jeppe Junior School and Jeppe Central School, but was not much of a scholar. At the age of 14, his Head Teacher told him that academic studies were wasted on the son of a tradesman. In turn his father, proud of craft, thought Alex was not good enough with his hands to be apprenticed for a skilled trade, unlike Alex's brothers, Tommy and Ned (Edward), who both trained as fitters, and George, who became an electrical engineer. Alex found work in the offices of the merchant firm of De Leeuw. He went to night school and qualified as a chartered secretary. He was an early victim of the Great Depression in 1929 and walked the streets for nine months looking for work. Eventually, he managed to get a job as storeman in the parts division of Williams Hunt, motor dealers, later taking a wage cut to hold on to the job. After his marriage in 1931, his father-in-law, Alexander Zwarenstein, gave him work in the family wholesale butcher's business. He eventually became factory manager and a director of the family company until he sold out his interest in 1951 to devote himself to his work as a Labour Member of Parliament, pamphleteer and journalist.

## The SA Labour Party

Tom and Agnes were foundation members of the South African Labour Party (SALP), established in 1908. The Party was modelled on the British Labour Party which had been set up two years earlier. It embraced the trade unions, socialists, social democrats and other left-wingers. The British influence was paramount, especially as most of the trade unions had their roots in Britain. The vast majority of workers involved in the early conflicts with the mine owners were British immigrants or colonials, the former coming from the mining areas of Durham, Northumberland, Cornwall, Yorkshire and Wales. Some were ex-soldiers of the British army who had remained in or returned after the Boer War. Most of the railwaymen were British-born. This English-speaking working class was augmented by white immigrants from Australia, America and some European countries. Afrikaners comprised only a small minority of the country's white labour force but their influx into the mining industry was noticeably increasing. Unlike the English speakers they had no trade union background or experience of industrial disputes. They were the white rural poor, entering a strange new world. The Boer War was still vivid in their memories, the bitterness of defeat burning within them. This and the language barrier made it difficult for them to integrate with the British immigrants who spoke only English.

Agnes was an active supporter of the suffragette movement. She recounted, with much mirth, the confrontations when the women used their sharp hatpins to good effect against the backsides of policemen who were manhandling them. Tom was a staunch trade unionist. He was secretary of the Jeppestown branch of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (ASE), at the time part of the British union of that name. He was a shop steward at Wright Boag. Alex recalled his joy at being allowed to date-stamp the union's meeting notices and to fill in the members' names. At election times both Tom and Agnes worked energetically for Labour candidates and, in the 1911 parliamentary election, their house in Troyeville was used as a committee room.

Tom's employers tolerated his trade union activities because he was good at his trade, dependable, and popular with his workmates. He expected workers to stand loyally together and constantly fight for fair wages and conditions, and he was contemptuous of those who grudged support for the union yet used every ruse to skimp on their daily work. Alex remembered him telling another union member: 'bad workers are bad trade union members', saying that men who were disloyal to the union were usually those who were poor craftsmen, cringing to employers, and had to be carried by their workmates.

## The 1913 strike

The Union government, led by the Boer generals Botha (Prime Minister) and Smuts (Minister of Defence), had no sympathy for the English-speaking trade unionists. As far as the government was concerned, in a conflict between capital and labour, the employers had to be protected with the utmost force if necessary. The first major confrontations occurred in 1913 and 1914. In April 1913 a new manager was appointed to the New Kleinfontein Gold Mine, Benoni. He asserted his authority with vigour, dismissing white mechanics who would not agree to longer working hours. A strike ensued. The Federation of Trades, the trade union association, intervened to raise other grievances including the full recognition by management of unions at the mine. The management would have none of it and began to take on strike-breakers. This infuriated the strikers who set about the scabs, beating them up and wrecking their homes. A public demonstration in support of the strikers was broken up by a large force of armed mounted police and two squadrons of Royal Dragoons. Rioting broke out, and police fired on crowds of demonstrators killing at least 20 people and wounding 47 others on a single 'Black Saturday'.

Botha and Smuts were forced to intervene and negotiated a 'peace treaty' with the strikers' leaders. This provided that all strikers were to return to work without victimisation, and that the government would inquire into their grievances. However, it was clear from the start that the government had no intention of having the grievances remedied. Smuts declared that the trade union would not be recognised unless a number of conditions were met, including the power of the government to alter the union's rules as it deemed necessary. He was bent on revenge for the humiliation of signing the peace treaty with the strikers. In what historians are now agreed was a carefully planned manoeuvre, the management of the railways deliberately provoked a conflict by dismissing significant numbers of men on Christmas Eve 1913 as the men were about to go on annual leave. Smuts moved in strong forces of armed burghers (Boers) from the rural areas and mobilised the Active Citizens' Force. The authorities began arresting Labour leaders using an Ordinance enacted by the British colonial government under Lord Milner, authorising the detention of any person for 21 days without charge or trial.

The entire executive committee of the ASE was seized while holding a meeting in the union offices. These included the branch secretary, George Steer, who was married to Alex's aunt (Agnes's elder sister). Steer was a keen supporter of British imperialism and a strict disciplinarian. He was born in Plymouth in 1865 and went to South Africa with imperial troops at the age of 19, going through the siege of Ladysmith. After

Steer's discharge from the army, Tom found him a job as storeman at the engineering works where he was employed and insisted that he join the union. Steer went on to become president of the Witwatersrand Trades and Labour Council, Chairman of the Labour Party, first Labour mayor of Johannesburg in 1919, and later a Member of Parliament.

The strikes quickly collapsed under the armed onslaught by the authorities. Nine of the Labour leaders were unlawfully deported by Smuts to England, where British trade unions organised mass protest demonstrations. It was only in September 1914 after the outbreak of the First World War, in which the Union government supported Britain, that Smuts allowed the deportees back because he needed the co-operation of English-speaking workers in the face of an armed rebellion being planned by disaffected Boers, including General de la Rey, the man Smuts had chosen to lead the armed forces against the strikers.

Behind this struggle for the rights of workers to organise and to strike, lay the deep-seated, constant anxiety of the minority white community about a possible rise in black power. Smuts used, as one of the justifications for his harsh action, the fear that black workers would follow the example of white workers and exercise the strike weapon to get economic justice. Evidence was produced that whites first invited blacks to join in the strike and then, when there was no response, warned the blacks that if they dared to work with strike-breakers they would be blown up with dynamite. While white strikers on the Witwatersrand and Pretoria were summarily arrested, black strikers at Jagersfontein Diamond mine in the Orange Free State were subdued by rifle fire. In January 1914, the black workers at Jagersfontein refused to continue working until action was taken against a white overseer who had kicked a black worker to death. The management's response was to muster and arm all white employees. When the strikers tried to break out of their compound to link up with those in other compounds, the whites opened fire, killing eleven and wounding thirty-seven. This terrorised the majority who returned to work but 250 still refused and were arrested and jailed under the Master and Servants Law. In a remarkable display of white 'justice' a judicial inquiry was unable to decide who was to blame for the cold-blooded shooting and none of the killers was prosecuted. No recompense was made to the victims and their dependants.

In the months following the collapse of the white workers' strike, the employers took brutal revenge on strikers and their families with the clear purpose of destroying workers' unity and crippling the trade union movement. The state-owned railways refused to re-employ men who had willingly taken part in the strike, and strikers who

had been living in railway cottages were evicted without mercy. The Chamber of Mines, which wielded vast power in government and industry, compiled a blacklist of men who should not be re-employed. The list was not confined to mineworkers; it extended to outside engineering and manufacturing concerns dependent on work from their mining companies. The use of this blacklist manifested the viciousness of the mine owners in inflicting punishment upon the white working class – the men they were pleased to call the ‘aristocrats of labour’ and ‘the privileged overseers’.

Tom was one of those on the blacklist. After being refused re-employment by Wright Boag, he began what was a long and fruitless search for work. He suffered, as did many others, the crushing experience of starting a job in the morning and being told later in the day to put on his coat because a mistake had been made in taking him on. The fact was that the blacklist had been consulted and the employer was obliged, at the direction of the mine owners to sack him at once. Tom’s was a family of seven and it was a wonder how they managed to keep going. Alex was nine at the time and recalled the kindness of the corner grocer, who not only gave extended credit to strikers’ families, but never failed to give him a sweet when he collected the groceries.

The tide turned for Tom quite unexpectedly when one day a car pulled up outside the house and a director of Wright Boag presented himself and offered Tom his old job back on certain conditions. They were that he should accept the lower wage introduced after the strike and give up his trade union activities. Strongly supported by Agnes, he turned the offer down. The next day, two directors turned up to try to persuade Tom. They needed him for an urgent job for the repair of a ship lying in Durban harbour, a piece of marine engineering of which he had special knowledge because of his training at Doxfords. In view of his financial circumstances, it was an offer that was difficult to refuse, but Tom stood his ground. Eventually it was agreed that he should go back to his old job, with an increase of ten shillings a week on his old pay, and no restraints on his normal trade union activities. The Chamber of Mines was probably not informed by Wright Boag.

Although life was better for Tom’s family after he returned to work, others were not so fortunate. One of these was Bob Hepple, Tom’s younger brother, who had migrated to South Africa after the Boer War and was working at the Durban-Roodepoort Deep gold mine when the 1913 and 1914 strikes took place. He was sacked and evicted from the single quarters where he was living. Wherever he went looking for work, he found the blacklist in operation, even in jobs he thought far removed from the power of the

mine owners. As the months passed he went hungry too often and his health failed. He died in hospital from dropsy, brought on by his deficient diet and aggravated by miners' phthisis, his name still on the blacklist.

## The 1922 strike

The next major confrontation was the 1922 strike. Since the 1911 Mines and Works Act, there had been a statutory colour bar reserving certain skilled occupations in mining and engineering for whites. There were also informal racial quotas for semi-skilled work. During the 1914-18 War when whites were deployed on military duties, blacks were put on semi-skilled work. The Chamber of Mines wanted to extend this use of cheap black labour. When the white unions rejected their proposals to reduce the proportion of white to non-white workers, the Chamber informed the unions that the status quo on racial quotas was ended and wages would be cut. On 10 January 1922 some 20,000 White employees in the gold mines went on strike. For the Afrikaners who were new to industry this was their first experience of industrial action. They influenced the tactics of the strike organisers, and formed themselves into armed commandos in the style they had used in the Boer War. At first the police welcomed this because they thought the commandos would provide assistance in the event of a 'native outbreak'. English-speaking trade unionists found themselves for the first time working with the new Afrikaner workers – mainly dispossessed farmers – in the common cause of maintaining the colour bar. The blacks were seen as the real enemy and the emphasis was shifted to 'preserving white South Africa', and the 'defence of white civilisation'. They raised the infamous slogan 'Workers of the World Unite for a White South Africa!'

Tom was in poor health and off work when the strike took place. This did not stop the police hustling him at bayonet point from his house to the police station. The strike descended into bloody conflict as the commandos, picketing the mine heads, clashed with police. In the fighting with troops sent in by Smuts, more than 200 Whites were killed and 500 wounded; there were also 31 Blacks killed and 67 injured. The uprising was called a 'Red Revolt', said to be inspired and led by communists, but this was far from the truth. The Communist Party had been formed in 1921 but had little influence over the strike. The violent and disastrous ending of the strike was, in Bill Andrews' words, 'the end of an epoch in South African trade union history.'<sup>20</sup> The Chamber of Mines was able to impose humiliating conditions on the workers. At the same time, the courts declared the colour bar regulations *ultra vires*, leaving the mine owners free to employ black workers on jobs previously reserved for whites.

The resulting bitterness of Afrikaner and English-speaking workers against Smuts and his party led to an alliance between the Nationalist Party under General Herzog and the Labour Party, and to the election of a Pact Government in 1924, including two Labour

cabinet ministers. The industrial legislation enacted under the Pact Government set the pattern of discrimination which was strengthened after 1948 under the *apartheid* regime. Blacks were excluded from the statutory system of collective bargaining through industrial councils and the Mines and Works Act was amended to reverse the judicial decision. Blacks were barred from a large number of skilled occupations. Before long, disagreements developed among the Labour party leaders leading to a split between a minority led by Cresswell, and the official party led by Madeley who wanted no further Pact with Herzog. The official party fared badly in the elections - the privileged white working class had deserted the party for the even more reactionary Nationalists.

With the outbreak of the Second World War, General Smuts became Prime Minister and asked for Labour support, which was readily given. Smuts appointed the Labour leader Madeley as Minister of Labour and through him established links with the white trade unions. Labour had an electoral pact with Smuts' party in the 1943 war-time elections and won nine seats. Provincial Council elections were held in the same year and Alex was elected member of the Transvaal Provincial Council for the South Rand constituency. Five years later he won the Rosettenville parliamentary seat for Labour, and was re-elected in 1953. He became Leader of the party that year, and immediately declared that he would follow socialist principles. 'Only a true socialist party pledged to change the economic system' he wrote, 'can offer any real hope to all the people of South Africa.'<sup>21</sup>

## Chapter 2: The socialist objective

*The state in which no one will be distinguished or honoured above his fellows except for virtue or talent; where no man will find his profit in another's loss, and we shall no longer be masters and servants, but brothers, free men and friends; where there will be no weary, broken men and women passing their lives in toil and want, and no little children crying because they are hungry and cold.'*

*(Robert Tressell)*

### What kind of socialism?

Alex's commitment to socialist ideas and his repulsion against fascism and all forms of dictatorship was the key to his political actions. 'In all walks of life,' he wrote, 'we are confronted by the evils of a social order which allows a few people to live in luxury while the majority struggle for existence, constantly haunted by the fear of unemployment and poverty, a social order which allows surpluses and wasteful competition, or shortages and prohibitive prices.' He advocated a 'planned democratic socialist society' which, in his words, could 'abolish misery and want and ensure that all will work and give their best for the common good.' 'The objective is a society in which production will be for use and not for profit.'<sup>1</sup>

His understanding of socialism was shaped by his working-class experience, his love of books by British socialist and radical writers, and the anti-fascist movement of the 1930s. He was a self-educated man. In his twenties he gained inspiration from the romantic poets who protested passionately against the evils of social reality in the emerging industrial society. A personal anthology of poetry and other writings that he transcribed at that time includes passages from *Prometheus Unbound*, in which Shelley adapted Aeschylus' symbolism and mythology to the themes of political revolution and moral regeneration. The anthology quotes from Shelley's melodramatic tragedy, *The Cenci*, in which the villain, Count Cenci, is depicted as a fervent Catholic who could cloak his atrocious deeds in his religion. Shelley's portrayal of the culture of hypocrisy struck a chord for Alex. He had been brought up as a Roman Catholic by his mother, but had lapsed at the age of 19, never to return to any church, when the priest reprimanded him for questioning Catholic dogma.

His anthology also includes poetry by William Morris, who 'was brought to socialism by his conscious revolt against that mechanical materialism which reduced the story of mankind to an objectless record of struggle for "survival of the fittest"'.<sup>2</sup> Alex was stirred not only by Morris' moral ideal of 'socialism as fellowship' but also by his praise for heroic deeds and fearless action against oppression.

Alex was not a theoretician, but a practical socialist. He was brought up on the writings of the Fabian socialists – his parents even gave his youngest brother the forenames George Bernard after George Bernard Shaw. Although Alex had *Das Kapital* and Marxist works on his bookshelves (until the Nationalists made possession of them a criminal offence), it was books like Shaw's *Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism* that shaped his conception of socialism. Alex agreed with Shaw's warning that Marxism should not be treated as a new religion. He believed that socialism was superior to capitalism but did not think that it was 'an inevitable, final supreme category in the order of the universe'.<sup>3</sup> In an article on 'South Africa and the socialist objective' in 1951 Alex cited Shaw:

*'Socialism is not charity nor loving kindness, nor sympathy with the poor nor popular philanthropy with its something-for nothing almsgiving and mendacity, but the economist's hatred of waste and disorder, the aesthete's hatred of ugliness and dirt, the lawyer's hatred of injustice, the doctor's hatred of disease, the saint's hatred of the seven deadly sins.'*<sup>4</sup>

A book that Alex often referred to, as did other socialists of his generation, was Robert Tressell's socialist novel, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*. Tressell was the pen name of Robert Noonan, a scenic artist and signwriter, who left Ireland and migrated to Johannesburg in 1895 – the same year as Tom, Alex's father. They were both active trade unionists who may have known each other. Noonan later returned to Hastings in England, which became the model for Mugsborough, the town in which the novel is set around the year 1905. When asked to explain the causes of poverty and of capitalist crises, Alex would relish re-telling the 'Great Money Trick' an entertaining chapter in which Owen, the socialist building worker, in effect, demonstrates Marx's labour theory of value. Owen does it with blocks of bread. He takes the role of the capitalist class. Three of the workers play the working-class. Owen cuts slices of bread. They represent the raw materials. The workers are paid to change the raw materials into goods which they do by cutting each slice into three blocks. Owen pays them each one block of bread, a third of the value of the goods they have made. At the end of the week the capitalist has two blocks, a worker has one. Every week, the worker has

## What kind of socialism?

to use this block to buy the necessities of life for which the capitalist charges. So at the end of the week the worker has nothing, and the capitalist's profits mount up while the worker remains poor. This process results in too much being produced, the workers cannot buy the products they make, the factory closes and the workers lose their jobs. The workers are the philanthropists who donate the surplus value which their labour produces to the capitalist and, in the end, this leads to a crisis of overproduction. The solution, says Owen, is a 'co-operative commonwealth'. In a classic chapter entitled 'The Great Oration', he advocates a system of public ownership of industry 'for the production and distribution of the necessities of life, not for the profit of a few, but for the benefit of all.'<sup>5</sup> For the socialist protagonist in the novel, there was no one worse than those 'ragged trousered philanthropists'<sup>6</sup> who slaved for their bosses but would not participate in trade unions in order to protect their class from gross exploitation.

In the late 1930s, Alex eagerly awaited each new publication by the Left Book Club, set up by Victor Gollancz with John Strachey and Harold Laski to promote socialist ideas and resistance to fascism. For 256d subscribers received the Left Book of the Month which included works such as George Orwell's *Road to Wigan Pier*, GDH Cole's *The People's Front*, Leonard Woolf's *Barbarians at the Gate*, and HN Brailsford's *Why Capitalism Means War*. There can be little doubt that Alex's views about the Soviet Union were affected by writings such as Sidney and Beatrice Webb's *Soviet Communism: a new civilisation?*, published by the Left Book Club in 1935 (a second edition omitted the question mark). The Webbs painted an extremely favourable picture of the bureaucracy of state socialism, the abolition of private profit, and the achievement of social equality. They were blissfully blind to the reality of dictatorship in the years of Stalin's Great Purge (euphemistically described as 'the removal of dead wood' by the Webbs).<sup>7</sup> Stories of Stalinist repression that leaked out to South Africa were treated with deep suspicion by many socialists in this period, including Alex, as capitalist propaganda. This was influenced by their belief that the Soviet Union would be the main bulwark against fascism and war as shown by support for the Spanish republicans, so the communists and democratic socialists had to make common cause. Alex was alerted to the menace of fascism and national socialism by Left Book Club books on events in Italy and Germany and others on the Spanish Civil War. He saw the Chinese revolution through accounts such as Edgar Snow's *Red Star over China*, highly sympathetic to Mao.

But his critique of capitalism was not primarily based on what he read. It was the product of his own experience of workers' struggles, and the humiliation and hardship he and his family had suffered. His work over a period of 20 years as a factory manager, secretary and director of a small company gave him a deep practical understanding

of the economics of business. His conclusion was that there had to be a better form of economic and social organisation than capitalism. Like the majority of socialists of his and his father's generation, he saw public ownership of the 'means of production, distribution and exchange' as the solution – production for people and not for private profit. The orthodox socialist view was that this meant nationalisation. Alex's great Labour hero was Keir Hardie who, as sole representative of the Independent Labour Party in the British Parliament in 1893 unsuccessfully moved a Nationalisation of Mines Bill. Alex, a lifelong member of the British Labour Party as well as the South African one, shared the aims of the British Labour Party's 1945 election manifesto to nationalise basic industries. The other feature of the kind of socialism that he espoused was that it was democratic. This meant not only political democracy and civil liberties, but also industrial and social democracy with workers participating in control of their industries and the accountability of public corporations to elected representatives of the people.

These aims were remarkably close to those which came later to be embodied in the Freedom Charter adopted at the Congress of the People in 1955. The Charter contained some clauses with a 'socialist' flavour, such as 'the people shall share the country's wealth', 'the land shall be shared among those who work it', 'there shall be work and security' and a call for the nationalisation of the mineral wealth, banks and monopoly industry. These were demands of which a British Fabian socialist could approve. The nationalisation clauses described little more than had been implemented by the post-war Labour Government in Britain. In the South African context, however, Mandela regarded these clauses not as embodying tenets of 'scientific socialism' but 'as action that needed to be taken if the economy was not to be solely owned and operated by white businessmen.'<sup>8</sup>

## Girlie's influence

What was unique in South Africa about Alex's socialism – shared by only a few other whites – was the conviction that socialism was not possible without full equality for all, irrespective of race, gender or any other status.

This conviction was cemented and developed by his marriage on 3 October 1931 to my mother, Josephine ('Girlie') Zwarenstein.<sup>9</sup> Their life together was based on strongly shared values, expressed in their political work. Girlie recognised in Alex a man of great depth, courage, decency and integrity. In a self-deprecating way she always maintained that all the ideas came from him, while she was the organiser who saw that they got carried out. In fact, they talked about everything. News items, political and other developments were endlessly discussed and debated. She was no silent listener – they argued back and forth and then forged a common understanding. She did the careful research on which his articles and speeches were based, and ran all the election campaigns in which he was a candidate.

Alex converted Girlie to socialism. She had an instinctive respect for the dignity of every human being regardless of race, colour or other attribute. This was part of her own upbringing. Her father, Alexander Zwarenstein, and her mother, Jacoba Schaap came from Dutch Jewish families but did not practise any religion. They called themselves 'freethinkers'. One might describe them as 'Jews without Judaism'.<sup>10</sup> Holland was a liberal country, a place of 'benign pluralism'<sup>11</sup> which, since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, had accepted Jews who were being persecuted in other parts of Christian Europe. The Zwarensteins had traded as butchers in South Holland since at least the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when the family records begin. From the age of about 12, Alexander had the job of rowing out to meet ships coming into the port of Rotterdam and to board them in order to take orders from them before rival butchers' boys could do so. In 1898, on the eve of the Boer War, Alexander, aged 20, left Holland to join three of his brothers who had emigrated to the Transvaal Republic. They all joined the Boer forces. Simon was captured by the British and deported to St Helena. Alexander was a *rapportryer* (dispatch rider) who rode horseback between Boer headquarters and the forces besieging Mafekeng. At the end of the War, he returned to find a British 'Tommy' on guard outside his butcher's shop which, in common with other Boer-owned businesses, had been seized by the British. In a negotiation we can only imagine, he persuaded the soldier (whose name was Hardy) to let him re-open the shop in return for the promise that Hardy could be a sleeping partner in the business, a subject of complaint by Alexander for the rest of his life, although in fact the Hardy and Zwarenstein families became close friends. The shop expanded into a wholesale butcher's business, under the name of Azet Products

('Ah Zet' being the Dutch pronunciation of Alexander's initials). The business fluctuated. Girlie described times when there was not even a loaf of bread in the house, but her parents always 'thought positive'- they survived and at times prospered. There was a tragic end for those of the Zwarenstein family who remained in Holland. They were deported by the Nazis and perished in Auschwitz. Girlie's father died in Johannesburg in June 1942 and so never got to hear this distressing news, but a graphic account of their suffering and deportation was given to the family by a cousin, Bertha Monasch, who had survived by hiding throughout the war. The personal link with the fate of these Holocaust victims had a deep effect on the whole family.

Girlie and her sister Dolly (Dorothy) were supported in making their own careers. With their love of children, it is no surprise that both became teachers, one of the few careers then open to women. Girlie went to Teachers' Training College and was awarded her Certificate as a teacher in 1925. She obtained a post at a primary school in Elsburg, a town on the East Rand, but under the discriminatory rules then in force had to resign when she married.



Alex and Girlie met when Girlie's cousin, Fred Zwarenstein, brought Alex to Girlie's parents' house in Bezuidenhout Valley to play tennis. This picture was taken in about 1930 after their engagement.

## The anti-fascist movement

Girly and Alex got together at the time of a great crisis of capitalism – experienced by Alex as one of the unemployed - with memories of the Great War close at hand. They were alarmed by the rise of Nazism and fascism, and the preparations for another war, presaged by the Spanish Civil War. In the 1930s, they joined the small but vocal anti-fascist movement in South Africa. They saw the similarities between the ‘master race’ ideologies of the Nazis and those of white domination in South Africa. The links were strong: BJ Vorster (later Minister of Justice and then Prime Minister), Oswald Pirow (later prosecutor in the Treason Trial) and HJ van den Bergh (later head of the Bureau of State Security) had been leaders of the *Ossewa Brandwag* (Ox Wagon Sentinel), a militant national socialist movement which sought the establishment of an authoritarian state, with citizenship confined to ‘assimilable white elements’, the abolition of private enterprise and the breaking of the British connection. In 1945 Alex prophetically asked: ‘After years of sacrifice and bitter struggle against fascism abroad, must the future South Africa breed a nation of bullies, persecutors and terrorists, and provide new Buchenwalds?’<sup>12</sup> ‘In rejecting capitalism and socialism’, commented Alex, ‘the Nationalists have chosen “controlled capitalism” which is a polite term for fascism.’<sup>13</sup> When Oswald Moseley, the British fascist, established links with Pirow, Alex wrote: ‘[White] domination is not possible under democracy, but offers great possibilities to those who put their faith in fascism.’<sup>14</sup>

## Relations with the communists

There was a handful of white socialists who did not share the racism of the Labour mainstream and left to form the Communist Party (CPSA). Why did Alex and Girlie not follow them? Tom and Agnes' home had been a meeting place for socialists and they had lodgers, among whom were WH (Bill) Andrews and Sidney Percy Bunting, both of whom later helped to form the CPSA. Bunting lived with them in Troyeville in 1913-14. Their house overlooked Bezuidenhout Valley, the constituency which Bunting won for Labour in the Transvaal Provincial Council elections in 1914. Alex was nine years' old at the time. He and his brothers were vastly amused at Bunting's morning routine of suddenly emerging from his room and dashing upstairs for his daily cold shower and down again to get ready for a hurried breakfast, and then careering out of the front door and up the street. That was all they saw of him, for he would return late at night, long after the boys were asleep. Tom and Agnes met him soon after he joined the Labour Party. Politically they found much in common with him but Agnes said, in later years, that he had too many 'complicated theories' for the ordinary person to understand. She said that his views on the 'native question' disturbed many of his colleagues and he was considered to be 'before his time'. Bunting had come to South Africa in 1900. He was an intellectual with a non-conformist Wesleyan background and had won the Chancellor's Prize, for classical languages, at Oxford University. Tom and Agnes were not surprised that Bunting, after leaving the Labour Party in 1914, was soon attracted to the cause of the black worker and then immersed himself in the CPSA when it was formed in 1921.

Bunting wrote, 'not till we free the native can we hope to free the white.'<sup>15</sup> In the words of Edward Roux

*[Bunting] had joined the Labour Party because he sensed the grievances of the white workers and admired their struggle against a powerful Chamber of Mines. The July [1913] strike had filled him with bitterness against a ruling class and its government, which did not scruple to shoot men down, and to imprison and deport without trial. He had accepted the idea of a working-class revolution as the great goal of humanity. He had seen the necessity of bringing in the [Afrikaner worker]. When the [1914-18] War broke out he had accepted the logic of his position as a socialist; his loyalty was to the working-class and not to any national government. Now the logic of events had made him the leader of a*

*group of international socialists. As an international socialist he could not but realise that the main social fact in South Africa as the subjugation of a black majority by a white minority.*<sup>16</sup>

The opportunity for the international socialists to break from the Labour Party came with the 'war-on-war' split of 1914-15. Like the British Labour Party, the SALP resolved in 1913 that, if war threatened workers of all countries involved should try to prevent it by simultaneous stoppage of work. But when war actually came, the SALP, like the British Party, was split between pro- and anti-war factions. It did not take long for the jingoistic English-speaking workers to be carried along by patriotic fervour. At a special conference in August 1915, the pro-war faction won (by 82 votes to 30), the result being greeted with cheers and boos, and the singing of the Red Flag. Andrews, one of the leading anti-warites, was ousted as chairman and replaced by Alex's uncle, George Steer; other anti-warites were purged. They had meanwhile formed an International Socialist League (ISL) within the party to propagate 'the principles of international socialism'. The ISL afterwards became a separate party and the forerunner of the Communist Party founded in 1921. 'One of the justifications for our withdrawal from the Labour Party', wrote Bunting, 'is that it gives us untrammelled freedom to deal, regardless of political fortunes, with the great and fascinating problem of the native.'<sup>17</sup>

Tom and Agnes had much more in common with the Suffolk-born, working-class socialist and prominent trade union leader Bill Andrews, who became a Labour MP from 1912-16, and later a founding member of the Communist Party. His biographer notes that 'while it was impossible for [Andrews and the four other Labour MPs] to push through legislative improvements in the face of Government and sham opposition, they used Parliament as a propaganda platform with great skill' and 'almost usurped the functions of [the official] opposition.'<sup>18</sup> Alex – who kept in touch with Andrews throughout his life - and his Labour colleagues were to use Parliament with similar skill and effect 30 years later against the Nationalist Government and sham United Party Opposition.

The sinking of the *Lusitania* in May 1915<sup>19</sup> and the anti-German rioting which followed persuaded many Labour supporters that it was their duty to help in the war against Germany. Alex described the effects of this he saw in his own family:

*'Both my parents were strongly opposed to the war and among the first to join the War-onWar league, yet they were unable to withstand the emotional frenzy of patriotism aroused by the sinking of the Lusitania. I remember well the day my father came*

*home from work and told us that he had joined the special constabulary, to release some policemen for active service. He himself was too old for the army and in any case physically unfit, having lost an eye playing cricket at the Johannesburg Wanderers shortly before the Boer War. I listened raptly as he discussed his decision with my mother. They argued its implications on affairs in the local branch of the Labour Party, where members were divided on the issue and also its effects on their personal relations with friends who were also anti-war. As events turned out, [Tom and Agnes] were doing the same as most others. They dropped out of the War-on-War League and devoted themselves to working for the Labour Party and its election candidates.<sup>20</sup>*

## Why the Labour Party?

Alex and Girlie had several reasons for devoting their efforts to the Labour Party. First, their socialist beliefs made the Labour Party a natural home. It was the community in which Alex had grown up, and he knew many of the Party's leaders and members as family friends. He and Girlie believed that, as white South Africans, the best role they could play was as a bridge between black and white, by persuading their colleagues in the all-white Labour Party and the white electorate to accept the inevitability of majority rule. 'Those of us who wanted South Africa to embark upon a progressive path towards an eventual, free, democratic society with equal rights for all' wrote Alex 'accepted the fact that we had to make some compromise with the conservative elements in the party if we were to have any success at all. In taking a cautious path we believed we could create opportunities to educate and persuade others to follow our lead.'<sup>21</sup>

A second reason for not joining the Communist Party was that Alex and Girlie were democratic socialists. Alex explained in an article on 'Labour and the communist bogey' in 1947 that:

*'The chief difference between ourselves and the communists is that we are determined to achieve socialism through the ballot box and they by more direct and militant means; we believe that once won we shall hold socialism by the democratic rule of the majority, while they say it must be held by a dictatorship of the proletariat.'*<sup>22</sup>

He acknowledged that 'here in South Africa, where the franchise is limited to the Europeans only, who themselves comprise the upper classes of the nation...the Labour Party faces an uphill struggle, being accused on the one hand of being communists and *kaffirboeties* and abused by the communists on the other hand because of its non-European policy,' but expressed his conviction that-

*'With growing industrialisation and the recurring crises that beset the system of private, competitive enterprise, the Labour Party has a future. That future does not lie along the road of timidity and doubt, which leads only to United Party and capitalist favours. It lies along the road of courage, determination and a supreme contempt for the scheming of those who are opposed to us.'*<sup>23</sup>

A third reason for distancing themselves from the Communist Party was that the CPSA's programme in the 1930s, adopted under instructions from the Comintern,

## Why the Labour Party?

included the slogan: 'A South African Native Republic, as a stage towards a workers' and peasants' government.' Socialists like Alex and Girlie were committed to the cause of all workers, black and white. For them, equality could only be fully realised under socialism - abolish capitalism and class distinctions and the colour bar would go as well. They could not subscribe to a slogan which seemed to aim at a purely black, even anti-white, republic. They advocated the unity of all workers. The communists became obsessed with the correct interpretation of the instruction from the headquarters of the 'world revolutionary movement'. The CPSA was developing into a monolithic Leninist party which had no time for internal party democracy and, like the German Communist Party (KPD) at this time, saw social democracy as a greater obstacle to world revolution than the rise of Nazism.<sup>24</sup> As the internal conflicts in the CPSA unravelled, 'right-wing deviationists' who differed from the Comintern line (including Bunting and Andrews) were expelled. Alex and Girlie found themselves being condemned as 'social fascists' one day only to be welcomed as part of a 'united front' the next day. Although they did not engage in a public debate about this, a hint of their dissatisfaction with the communists can be found in a letter that Alex wrote on 22 February 1932 to the communist-led League of Soviet Friends (later called the Friends of the Soviet Union) explaining why he and Girlie had left early from a meeting of the League to which they had been invited, and would not be attending any more. 'My wife and I were disappointed, more honestly disheartened' by the 'perpetual and perplexing argument' which reminded them of the 'continual breaking away, petty quarrelling, selfishness and self-aggrandisement' then taking place in Russia.

Instead of becoming embroiled with the communists, Alex and Girlie turned their energies, with other progressives such as Jessie MacPherson (a Labour mayor of Johannesburg and Chair of the SALP), to conducting a long, frustrating and difficult struggle to remove the colour bar from Labour's policies, and to fighting for a non-racial democracy. Without that change in policy the aim of achieving socialism through the ballot box was unachievable.

Alex's vision was clearly expressed in an article on 'South African Labour and the socialist objective' in 1951:

*'The objective is a society in which production will be for use and not for profit. . . Like socialists the world over, the South African Labour Party is faced with the task of educating people in an understanding of Socialism. A planned democratic socialist society can abolish misery and want and ensure that all will work and give their best for the common good. . . However benevolent*

*capitalism may become, it is incapable of ridding itself of its economic ills and diseases. Insecurity, poverty, unemployment, fear, racialism and dozens of other evils are chronic to a system where private gain is the only incentive.*

*The task of the Labour Party today is to force the pace of reform and to curb the greed and power of vested interests. It can restrain those who seek to exploit the underprivileged. In fulfilling this role the Labour Party must speak for all the people. It cannot demand a better world for the poor white and deny it to the poor black... Only a true socialist party, pledged to change the economic system, can offer any real hope to all the people of South Africa.<sup>25</sup>*

## Chapter 3: Moving the Labour Party to non-racialism

*..[A]nd behold...men walked  
One with the other, even as spirits do.  
None fawned, nor trampled,  
Hate, disdain or fear,  
Self-love or self-contempt, on  
human brows  
No more inscribed.  
(Percy Bysshe Shelley)*

### Labour's racial dilemma

The truth is that the SALP, despite its constitution closely following that of the British Labour Party, was a socialist party only in name. Its constitution made the significant qualification to its socialist objectives that there must be 'due regard to the presence of an overwhelming native population and the necessity of maintaining and improving standards of life.' This, in Alex's words, 'conveniently allowed whatever interpretation party members chose to put upon it.' He wrote:

*'Throughout its existence the Labour Party wrestled with the problem of finding a policy which would be acceptable to the whites and at the same time do justice to the blacks. The task was not made any easier by the Party's right-wing racialists and the conservatism of several affiliated trade unions, concerned with protecting their white members from cheap black competition. Nevertheless the socialist and progressive element were able to introduce and preserve some liberal principles in regard to the voteless black majority. There were differences of opinion as to what the Party's "native policy" should be. Over the years, these were resolved by compromise, resulting in vague declarations and ambiguous statements.'*<sup>1</sup>

The Second World War brought increasing numbers of black workers into the expanding industries, employers became willing to pay higher wages to attract additional labour, and it was easier to get people to think about the adverse economic and social consequences of discrimination and segregation. Several able young trade unionists and intellectuals joined the Labour Party. Alex was a leading member of the Party's Economic Advisory Committee whose proposals for the 'amelioration of the

suffering and the economic improvement of the Native people' were accepted at a Party conference in December 1941. These included improving the wages, standard of living and health of blacks, the abolition of oppressive legislation such as the pass laws, the recognition and encouragement of strong black trade unions, free and compulsory education, better housing and education. The significance of these policy changes was that they ran counter to the principle of racial separation which the Party had preached since its foundation. 'They did not signify a conversion to the principle of racial equality but were a step in that direction.'<sup>2</sup>

The progressives realised that there was little hope of the major white parties accepting these policies. Their strategy was to focus on the official recognition of black trade unions and the extension of the Industrial Conciliation Act (which provided a system of collective bargaining) to cover black workers on the same basis as whites. 'If this could be achieved there could be a radical change in race relations and the way would be open to further concessions.'<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, despite the presence in Smuts' war-time cabinet of Walter Madeley, parliamentary leader of the Party, the Government and the white trade unions blocked recognition of black unions. Instead the Government invoked war measures to bring in troops to crush strikes. When employees of Pretoria city council struck work to obtain the same rate of pay as employees of Johannesburg council, 14 strikers were shot dead and 111 wounded.

The dilemma which faced Alex as the manager of a small factory (Azet) and, at the same time, a prominent member of the Labour Party which supported Smuts' war-time anti-Nazi government, is shown by his own experience of war measures. Workers in some food factories had gone on strike – a crime under the war measures – in support of wage demands. The police, armed with batons and guns, herded them into factory compounds and arrested their spokesmen. Azet was not affected because they were paying higher wages than their competitors and did not house their workers in compounds, but Azet's employees decided to stop work in sympathy. Within minutes two van loads of armed policemen arrived at the factory gates and Alex had the greatest difficulty in persuading the officer in charge not to make any arrests. An arbitrator awarded a small wage increase. Alex was called upon, with other employers, to sign a so-called 'agreement'. He refused to do so because the wages awarded were much below the wages already being paid by Azet, which was evidence of what the industry could afford. It was only after the Divisional Inspector of Labour had threatened to prosecute Alex, as he was entitled to do under the war measure, and Alex reflected that this would cause embarrassment to his party leader Madeley, Minister of Labour, that Alex decided to sign the document under protest, and to take

the matter up with Madeley. However, Madeley failed to do anything about this type of police action, and he even agreed to another draconian war measure which outlawed strikes in all industries, making strikers liable to a fine of £500 (the equivalent of about 6 years' wages for the average black worker at the time) and 3 years' imprisonment.<sup>4</sup>

Madeley lacked the ability or determination to pursue the Labour objective of equal trade union rights for all workers, irrespective of race. He was also unable to see that Labour's 'Native policy', which he had helped to formulate in 1910, had been overtaken by events. That policy had been one of racial segregation in which blacks and whites would develop separately in their own territories, a policy which was to be effected without the whites giving up a single inch of land! This policy was later appropriated by the Purified Nationalist Party under Dr Malan and after embellishment was presented to the white electorate as their grand plan of apartheid. Alex and other progressives argued that by the 1940s black workers had become too deeply integrated in the white economy to make separation, voluntary or compulsory, feasible. The final confrontation with Madeley and the right-wing of the Party (including Charles Henderson, the General Secretary) came in 1946. Smuts had introduced an Asiatic Land Tenure and Indian Representation Bill, which continued restrictive conditions on landholding by Asians but provided for a limited franchise for Indians. The Indian Congress rejected the Bill as discriminatory and embarked on a campaign of passive resistance. Many of Smuts' supporters thought the Bill went too far in conceding political rights, and the Nationalists and Dominion Party were strongly opposed to it. The majority of Labour's National Executive Council (of which Alex was a member) and Labour's members of parliament supported the Bill as a step forward, but Madeley voted against the Bill. He resigned as parliamentary leader and as a member of the Labour Party (of which he had been a founder), as did Henderson and other rebels. The Act was one of the major issues in the 1948 General Election, when the Nationalists emerged victorious with their policies of 'koelie uit die land'[coolie out of the country] and 'kaffer op sy plek' [kaffir in his place]. One of their first measures was to repeal Smuts'Act.

## A new policy

In 1946, during the dispute with Madeley, a Labour Party conference adopted a new 'Non-European policy', including socio-economic measures which would have improved the living standards of the mass of black people. But still wishing to get support from white voters, the policy was cautiously worded with white prejudice in mind. The Party had by now dropped its support for an industrial colour bar. It advocated the principle of 'equal pay for equal work' regardless of race. In the South African context this meant the white minimum rate of pay, yet employers considered white rates to be inflated and wanted to employ black workers on lower rates, so in practice the promise of equal pay was a hollow one and actually blocked progress by black workers towards skilled work. So far as political rights were concerned, the Labour policy was marred by retention of the principle of communal representation in a white parliament. Indians were to be allowed representation by whites elected on a communal roll; nothing was said about Coloureds, who were already on a communal roll electing white representatives; the principle of political rights for blacks was accepted, within an eventual federal political system, but for the present indirect representation would continue through 'Native representatives' in parliament.

Even these modest proposals for economic and political rights were seized upon by Labour's opponents to decry Labour as 'communists' and *kaffirboeties*. Under Alex's leadership after 1953, communal representation was described as only a 'short term programme'. In a statement of policy written by Alex, the Party, for the first time, expressly supported the objective of a universal adult franchise, and an end to the exclusion of non-whites from Parliament. It also changed the emphasis of its industrial policy to one of 'equal opportunity for all workers, subject to minimum wage standards and the principle of the rate for the job or equal pay for equal work.'<sup>5</sup> This shift to the policy of equality of opportunity was highly significant because it acknowledged that the principle of equal pay for equal work would hold back the advancement of black workers unless it was coupled with a principle that sought to remove the disadvantages from which black workers suffered in the labour market through discrimination and inferior treatment. The socialist perception of equality of opportunity went further than the left-liberal one. It was not limited to removing distinctions based on a person's race or other status, but would appeal to all workers by correcting for all disadvantages that are not freely chosen. This was not equality of outcomes as advocated by socialists like Bernard Shaw, but differences in outcome would reflect nothing but differences of taste and choice.

## Anti-Nationalist alliance

The Labour Party formed a war-time alliance with Smuts' United Party despite Smuts' past record. The slender majority, by which Parliament had committed South Africa to enter the war against Nazi Germany in 1939, showed how difficult it would be to mobilise the country's human and material resources for the prosecution of the war. However, in the 1943 parliamentary elections, more than 60 per cent of the white electorate supported the pro-War alliance, with Labour securing 9 seats. The electoral pact also covered provincial council elections. Alex, a member of the national executive and vice-chairman of the Transvaal party, did not want to seek public office because he thought this would make it impossible for him to carry on his full-time work as manager and a director of Azet. However, his colleagues managed to persuade him that it was his duty to stand for the South Rand constituency. He won by a large majority against an independent who had support from dissident United Party voters. Alex, now aged 39, found himself working to a hectic schedule. He started in the factory at 5 am, left for Pretoria, where the Council sat, at 1pm and seldom got home before midnight and often later. On evenings when the Council was not sitting, he served as a volunteer in the Civilian Protection Service which did ambulance duties to relieve men on active service. The CPS was a target for the *Ossewa Brandwag* who physically attacked the volunteers, including Alex, and their vehicles.

It was in this war-time alliance that Labour progressives subtly shifted the political agenda to that of fundamental freedoms and human rights. They prepared several policy documents based on Roosevelt's 'four freedoms' - of speech and religion, and from fear and want – the last two of which were included in the Atlantic Charter as principles shared by the Allies. These freedoms, said Roosevelt, meant the 'supremacy of human rights everywhere.'<sup>6</sup> What started as a war-time slogan was used by Alex and other progressives to press the need for radical changes in Labour's colour policy. 'It was obvious' said Alex 'that there would be no place in a free post-war world for a master-race society in South Africa and equally obvious that the rising generation of blacks would make every effort to free themselves from white domination.'<sup>7</sup>

When negotiating with the United Party in 1943, the Labour Party advocated that South Africa should officially endorse the Atlantic Charter. Labour called for a social security code, a national health service, free and compulsory education for all the people of South Africa, a national housing scheme to provide all the people with adequate housing, a national minimum wage, and greater freedom for the black population. Smuts said he welcomed these objectives and would incorporate them in his party's post-war planning. Indeed, the preamble of the United Nations Charter

–which reaffirmed ‘faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women’ –was first drafted by Smuts,<sup>8</sup> and the South African parliament ratified the Charter, which refers to the observance of these rights ‘without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion’. But when India petitioned the General Assembly in 1946 complaining of racial discrimination against South Africans of Indian origin, Smuts was reportedly shocked to see liberal principles turned against his policies which were more progressive than those of the Purified Nationalist Party led by Dr Malan. In their opposition to the Nationalists in power, Alex and his Labour colleagues made frequent reference to universal human rights enshrined in the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948. Alex pointed out that support for the Charter’s principles ‘strike at the heart of South African society and the privileged position of the European minority... Of all countries, South Africa will find it hardest to work within the principles of the Charter.’<sup>9</sup> Framing the issues in this way later made it possible to turn apartheid South Africa into a global outcast, the enemy of all humanity.

The rising popularity of the Nationalists after the war led Alex and others to believe that it was essential to come to terms with Smuts’ party to continue their electoral pact in the 1948 general election. Alex had not been one of the aspirants for the eight seats which Labour was allotted to fight under the pact. Jessie MacPherson had been endorsed as Labour candidate for the Rosettenville seat, but she and the trade union leader, ES (Solly) Sachs, had been subjected to a virulent campaign in the press and elsewhere as ‘communists’ and *kaffirboeties*. Rather than lose the seat, Jessie decided to stand down on condition that Alex should take her place. Alex was at first reluctant to do so because the personal implications were immense. But Jessie persuaded him that his voice was needed in the parliamentary party. The voters in Rosettenville were overwhelmingly English-speaking; most of them were artisans or white-collar workers. The two matters of most concern to them were domination by republican Afrikaners and the perceived threat of black political and economic advancement. Alex knew the area well – he was born there and went to the local convent and government school. He faced five ‘independent’ candidates, three of them right-wing ex-Labour members who campaigned on racist policies such as stricter control of black labour and by smearing Alex as part of the Red ‘Sachs-MacPherson clique’.

Alex faced difficulties with the constituency party; for example he had to stop them from campaigning for the removal from the area of St Peter’s priory run by the Community of the Resurrection, under the superintendence of Father Trevor Huddleston, for the training of African clergy. Not surprisingly, Alex put the emphasis

## Anti-Nationalist alliance

in his manifesto on economic issues such as the cost-of-living, housing shortages, wages and social welfare, rather than black political rights. He won by a substantial majority thanks to support from United Party voters who were loyal to Smuts' pact with Labour, although they disliked Alex' socialist policies. Labour won six seats in the country and the United Party 65. General Smuts himself lost his seat. The Nationalist Party (70 seats) and their Afrikaner Party allies (9 seats) were victorious but only by the narrow margin. This was the beginning of 46 years of Nationalist rule, the darkest period in South African history.



Alex in Rosettenville constituency office with constituency worker during May 1948 parliamentary election, in which there was an electoral pact between the United Party and Labour Party. He defeated the other five candidates by a large majority. The overall outcome of the election was Nationalist Party, 70 seats; Afrikaner Party, 9 seats; United Party, 65 seats; Labour Party, 6 seats, thus beginning over 40 years of Nationalist rule.



Nationalist leaflets in Johannesburg during 1953 election. Above linking Labour to Mau Mau. Below portraying Sachs-MacPherson-Hofmeyr and Labour as 'kaffirboeties'.

## Chapter 4: Voices for democracy and human rights

*Mourn not the dead that in the cool earth lie  
Dust unto dust  
The calm, sweet earth that mothers all who die  
As all men must;*

*Mourn not your captive comrades who must dwell  
Too strong to strive  
Within each steel-bound coffin of a cell,  
Buried alive;*

*But rather mourn the apathetic throng  
The cowed and the meek  
Who see the world's great anguish and its wrong  
And dare not speak!*

*(Ralph Chaplin)*

### Resisting the building of the apartheid state

Within two years of his election as an MP Alex resigned as head of Azet, which had shortly before become a public company, and became a full-time parliamentarian, journalist and pamphleteer. There followed a stream of articles exposing and criticising the building of the apartheid state. These appeared in the Labour newspaper *Forward*, the trade union paper *Saamtrek*, the liberal *Forum*, the left-wing *Fighting Talk*, as well as the main English language newspapers such as the *Rand Daily Mail*, *Natal Mercury*, *Evening Post*, and *Cape Times*. He also wrote several influential pamphlets in this period about the Broederbond-Nationalist attack on trade unions.<sup>1</sup>

In parliament, the Nationalists absorbed the smaller Afrikaner Party and lost no time putting the policies of racial segregation into effect and pushing South Africa towards their ideal 'disciplined, Christian-National Republican state'. Such measures as the Mixed Marriages Act, the Immorality Act, the Group Areas Act, the Population Registration Act, and the Suppression of Communism Act were followed in 1951 by the Separate Representation of Voters Act, a measure to deprive the Coloured people of the limited voting rights they had enjoyed since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The latter

provoked a constitutional crisis. The Appellate Division of the Supreme Court held on 20 March 1952 that the Act was invalid because it had not been passed by a two-thirds majority at a joint sitting of the House of Assembly and Senate as required by sections 35 and 152 of the Constitution. The Government promptly produced a High Court of Parliament Act, conferring overriding power to set aside by a simple majority any judgment of the Appeal Court. This Act was also declared invalid by the Appellate Division. In his speeches on these measures, Alex not only challenged their legal basis,<sup>2</sup> but also exposed the withdrawal of political rights from the Coloured people as the preliminary stage to depriving them of their land and other rights, and depressing their condition still further, a prediction which proved to be well-founded.<sup>3</sup>

There were public demonstrations protesting against the Government's flaunting of the constitution. A new movement of returned white soldiers, the War Veterans' Torch Commando, rallied thousands against the Government. Alex worked closely with their leaders and spoke at their public meetings. A United Democratic Front of the United Party, the Torch Commando and the Labour Party was formed 'to uphold the law against lawlessness and to defend the constitution.' But the Torch Commando, like the white political parties, was trapped by racialism. When Coloureds tried to join the movement, the Torch Commando could not reach agreement whether to allow them to do so. Alex wrote: 'Unhappily, it fought on one flank against the curtailment of the political rights of the Coloureds and on the other lined up with the forces of discrimination. In the process it lost its force and influence.'<sup>4</sup>

All of these events took place against the background of growing militancy among the Black, Indian and Coloured people who were excluded from democratic processes. The Congress Movement led the way. It had no response to appeals to successive governments over the years. In 1949, the ANC announced a programme of action calling for an end to co-operation with government institutions, boycotts, strikes and civil disobedience. In December 1951, the ANC wrote to the Government demanding direct parliamentary representation, the repeal of the pass laws and other oppressive legislation. When these demands were rejected, the Defiance Campaign was launched on 26 June 1952. Volunteers, led by Nelson Mandela, committed breaches of apartheid regulations at railway stations and post offices, and ignored curfew regulations. By the end of 1952, more than 8,000 volunteers had been arrested and, because they refused to pay fines, the prisons were overcrowded. The United Party responded by reiterating their own brand of white supremacy. Only the Labour Party among the

white parliamentary parties called for immediate consultations with the black leaders to address all their grievances. The Government's response was to introduce in January and February 1953, shortly before the general election, two harsh Bills, which became known as 'martial law Bills', to punish the defiance volunteers and, at the same time, to embarrass the United Party which did not want to be seen by the white electorate as siding with the blacks. The Public Safety Bill allowed for the declaration of a state of emergency and rule without parliament. The Criminal Law Amendment Bill laid down severe penalties, including whipping, for passive resistance against any law. The six Labour Party MPs stood alone in opposing these Bills. Their motion to refuse leave to introduce the Public Safety Bill described it as a 'ruthless attack on the liberties of the people'. The previous year, in a series of articles, Alex had analysed how South Africa was rapidly 'following the path that leads to a despotic state,' 'dishonouring our signature to the UN Covenant on Human Rights,' and rushing 'headlong... to fascism.'<sup>5</sup> He condemned the Suppression of Communism Act, the exclusion from Parliament of communist MPs, Sam Kahn, Brian Bunting and Ray Alexander, the banning of the left-wing *Guardian* and *Advance* newspapers, the removal of elected trade union leaders, censorship, the refusal of passports to dissidents (including his colleague Jessie MacPherson), and the introduction of identity cards. 'The rule of law has been outlawed in South Africa by the Nationalist Government' he said.<sup>6</sup>

The United Party, anxious to appease white fears, would not support Labour's outright rejection of the 'martial law' bills. Although this led to strain between the two opposition parties, they agreed to continue their electoral pact in the 1953 General Election. The Nationalist and United Parties shared the same basic objective of white supremacy. The Labour Party promised black workers opportunities to improve their status but qualified this with the proviso that this should not endanger the standards of white workers. During the campaign Alex received much abuse, and meetings were broken up by well-organised crowds of Nationalist hecklers and hooligans. But he was re-elected with a large majority, as one of five Labour MPs. Shortly before the election, John Christie, leader of the Labour Party, died. Alex, who had been acting leader for some months, was unanimously elected as leader in his place.

When he took his seat on the front bench as leader, he found himself becoming the most prominent speaker on the opposition benches. The United Party's irresolute posture meant that the small Labour group found it necessary to do the major work of tackling the Government. They offered an alternative: a move towards partnership with Non-Europeans, giving them franchise rights, full trade union rights, proper education and training, and equal opportunity. They were particularly powerful in debates on labour and industrial matters. The Nationalists, who had increased their majority in

the 1953 elections, pressed ahead with their apartheid programme. This included the Reservation of Separate Amenities Act 1953 providing for racial separation in public places and transport, the Bantu Education Act 1957 applying inferior education for black children, the Native Laws Amendment Act 1957 prohibiting the attendance of blacks at churches or at meetings in white areas, and the Native Labour (Settlement of Disputes) Act 1953, excluding black workers from trade union rights and prohibiting all strikes by them.

The Industrial Conciliation Act 1956 made it obligatory for trade unions to separate their members into white, Indian and coloured branches, to exclude blacks from membership and to elect only whites to executive positions. It also extended racial job reservation. The two-hour speech made by Alex against this measure was a masterly dissection of the sinister Nationalist plan to break trade unions. The speech was said by journalists to be one of the most memorable made in the South African parliament. During the debates on the Mines and Works Bill in 1956, he moved an amendment to abolish the colour bar in the mining industry and to replace it with the principle of equal pay for equal work.<sup>7</sup> Stanley Uys of the *Sunday Times* commented:

*'It was not startling that Mr Hepple's move to have [the colour bar] scrapped failed; what was startling was that someone dared to make it. Hardly anyone in Parliament, apart from the Labour members, agrees with Mr Hepple's views, but most have a great respect for his courage.'*<sup>8</sup>

The Nationalists revived the Separate Representation of Voters Bill. When Alex moved that the Bill be 'read six months hence', that is rejected, Dr Malan the Prime Minister replied that the motion was 'in fact a charge against the Creator' who had created the world with different countries and different people and different colours!<sup>9</sup> Despite what one commentator called 'this bit of inside information on the intentions of the Creator'<sup>10</sup> and the support of some United Party members, the Bill still failed to get the required two-thirds majority. It was two years later before the Government got the Bill through and then only by packing the Senate. When the Government, instead of extending political rights, proposed to set up a National Council for Coloured Affairs, Alex described this as a 'mockery of democratic representation' a 'crude and blatant attempt' to find Quislings among the Coloured people to serve on what was nothing more than 'an unrealistic sop.'<sup>11</sup>

## A voice for the voteless

Under Alex's leadership the issue of democratic representation was repeatedly raised in Parliament. An example is his motion in February 1957, seconded by his Labour colleague Leo Lovell, calling on the Government to convene a national convention, representing all sections of the community, white and non-white to consider, among other matters, 'the establishment and maintenance of a democratic society in South Africa in which fundamental human rights for all persons will be entrenched.'<sup>12</sup> This brought the demands set out in the Freedom Charter, adopted at the Congress of the People in 1955 (see below), on to the floor of the House of Assembly. The motion was opposed by Dr Hendrik Verwoerd, Minister of Native Affairs (later Prime Minister), whose reply was simple and to the point. He said that a national convention would 'create a set of circumstances as the result of which apartheid, segregation... will be destroyed for ever. By means of it they wish to lay the first foundation of equality between white and non-white...'. It took another four decades of bitter struggle before a convention of the kind Labour had demanded in 1957 was convened.

Alex and his Labour colleagues were a voice of the voiceless four-fifths of the population who had no representation in Parliament. For example, when the people of Alexandra Township near Johannesburg launched their epic bus boycott in 1957 against a rise in fares, walking the nine miles to work and nine miles back each day, Alex and the Bishop of Johannesburg (Ambrose Reeves) went to their demonstration, and witnessed the brutal actions of the police against the boycotters. They were accused of being 'troublemakers': 'what was a white man doing amongst a lot of African rowdies making trouble for the police?' asked one MP.<sup>13</sup> Alex responded, by recalling the heavy-handed police actions in the 1922 strike, and called for conciliation and negotiations with the boycott leaders.<sup>14</sup> When the Government tried to defeat the boycott by a Bill that prevented any rival bus company from taking over the routes from the bus company which had raised fares, it was Alex who exposed the real agenda of the Nationalists:

*The... Government have embarked on a vendetta against the African organisations and the African National Congress. Their aim is to break the spirit of four-fifths of the people of South Africa ... In the process they are striving to uphold Nationalist policies which have already brought shame and disgrace to South Africa throughout the world.<sup>15</sup>*

The Government had accused the boycott leaders of being 'agitators'. Alex responded that 'if anyone has acted as an agitator, as an intimidator and irresponsible person it is the

Minister...'. On a point of order, PW Botha (later State President) challenged the use of the word 'agitator' against a member of the Government, and the Deputy Speaker told Alex to 'moderate his language'. Amid indignant shouts from the Government benches Alex, quietly but firmly, ignored this ruling and went on to compare the 'statesmanlike' attitude of the ANC leaders (whose statements he quoted at length) with that of the Minister who was employing the 'big stick' methods of 'fools and tyrants'.<sup>16</sup>

The speeches by Alex and his Labour colleagues, Leo Lovell and Hymie Davidoff, against these and other apartheid measures faced a constant barrage from the government benches. They and the Native representatives were obliged to sit in a corner of the House known as the *kombuis* (kitchen). There were frequent noisy interventions, heckling and aggressive behaviour from Nationalist backbenchers, including PW Botha. When Alex spoke he was greeted by cries of 'Mau Mau', 'Porky' (a reference to his bacon factory) and even 'Jewboy' (although he was not Jewish). The Speaker, JH Conradie, did little or nothing to restrain this unparliamentary behaviour. In a motion of censure on the Speaker in 1954, which Alex said he would have preferred to have discussed in private, Alex mentioned the unfair and aggressive way in which he and his Labour colleagues had been rebuked by the Speaker and their points of order had been rudely ignored.<sup>17</sup> However, the first Nationalist Prime Minister, Dr Malan, used Labour's outright opposition as a stick to beat the United Party saying that 'Mr Hepple could be proud of the powerful influence his party exercised on the official opposition... He does not follow, he leads.'<sup>18</sup>

An example of his skill as a parliamentary debater can be found in his blistering attack in 1952 on the 'contemptuous', 'sarcastic' and 'incompetent' way in which Dr Eric Louw, the Minister of Economic Affairs, treated the opposition. He used this as a prelude to an exposure of Louw's hypocrisy in dealing with the black market in steel. Louw became very worked up. There were so many interjections by him that Alex stopped in his tracks and, addressing the chair, requested that the Minister should wait his turn to speak, and should follow the proper parliamentary procedure.<sup>19</sup> The Speaker failed to intervene and Louw persisted, but Alex was so sure of his ground that Louw was put on the defensive. Alex then turned his attention to Ben Schoeman, the Minister of Labour. Schoeman had made a sarcastic speech about a prominent Labour member who had defected to the United Party. Alex wittily reminded Schoeman that he would understand such opportunism because Schoeman had himself defected from the United Party to the Nationalists. Alex's real target in this exchange was the recommendations of an allegedly independent Industrial Legislation Commission,

set up by Schoeman, that a National Labour Board, similar to that in fascist countries, should be established. This would, in effect, destroy trade unionism. Alex was able to release the bombshell, which Girlie's research had unearthed, of a speech made by Schoeman 10 years earlier advocating exactly the same system. Alex's subtle but clear implication – in a speech full of irony and humour – was that Schoeman had pulled the strings for the Commission.<sup>20</sup> Girlie, who was in the gallery, recounted the effect on the House: 'what a noise- first the noise then a flash, then the roar of the bullet going through miles of space, the splash far out to sea.'<sup>21</sup>

There can be no doubt that the small Labour group considerably delayed the imposition of many Nationalist measures in the period 1948-58. In 1954, George Clay, gallery correspondent of the *Cape Times* said of the Labour group:

*'The five representative of the Labour Party in parliament play a role out of all proportion to their size as a political party. This is due mainly to their individual ability... They have already proved their worth in parliament beyond dispute. Last session they WERE the opposition. They kept up a fight against Nationalism throughout the period when the United Party, distracted by its internal trouble, was making only nominal contribution to the political struggle.'*<sup>22</sup>

The Port Elizabeth *Evening Post* said:

*'It has been the Labour Party that has fought consistently against the granting of dictatorial powers to ministers and the many encroachments on individual liberties which have flowed from Nationalist legislation.'*<sup>23</sup>

The *Rand Daily Mail* commented :

*'Mr Alex Hepple, the leader of the Labour Party, does not look like a giant killer. He is a round mild-looking little man with kindly eyes that twinkle behind their glasses. But he is not afraid of man, beast or bogey in the political arena. If he thinks something needs saying he says it –with a punch.'*<sup>24</sup>

That paper later described him as 'a brilliant parliamentarian...admired by both sides of the House for the battle he wages on behalf of South Africa's workers White and Black.'<sup>25</sup> The *Sunday Express* echoed this in 1956:

*'Mr Hepple's political views are unpopular and there is every chance that his party will be wiped out at the next election. But who will deny that he was the militant champion who always spoke up for the underprivileged and for social justice or that he was the authoritative voice of a parliamentary tradition from Burke and Fox to Merriman and Hofmeyr. It is one of the tragedies of our lives that his should be a voice in the wilderness.'*<sup>26</sup>

## Exposing the United Party

The powerful opposition of the Labour members to Nationalist extremism resulted in growing tensions with the United Party, which had surrendered to expediency, with ultra-conservatives gaining power. Their leaders were fearful that even the smallest concession to Blacks would be seen by the white electorate as a betrayal of the 'white civilisation' which the Party claimed to uphold. Alex said that 'it was difficult at times to discern the difference between the United Party and the Nationalists, except that the United Party blurred the picture in a cloud of evasive argument.'<sup>27</sup> Matters came to a head when Strauss, the Party's leader, declared in 1955 that 'it would be premature for the United Party to state now that it would restore the coloured people to the common roll when again returned to power'. Alex immediately made it clear that Labour remained uncompromisingly opposed to any tampering with the voting rights of the coloured people. A small group of liberal-minded MPs on the United Party benches (including Helen Suzman) agreed with Labour's attitude. Alex described how 'the Nationalists gleefully watched the United Party whips running to and fro, striving to prevent the rebels from retaliating by issuing their own statement dissociating themselves from the statement made by Strauss. Eventually the persuasive conciliators, Oppenheimer, Lawrence, Mitchell and Senator Tucker, intervened and the rebel group...dropped their opposition and toed the party line, as newly drawn by Strauss.'<sup>28</sup>

New divisions appeared among the white parties – Federals, Defenders of the Constitution, South Africa Bond, Anti-republicans, South Africa First, Central Party and Conservatives- but by 1958 most of these had faded away. In 1955, the United Party ousted Strauss as leader and replaced him with Sir de Villiers Graaff. 'The change in leadership' Alex reported 'made the United Party more irresolute than ever. In the two years to the 1958 elections the party seemed more concerned with restraining the Labour Party than with standing up to the Nationalists.'<sup>29</sup> The United Party tried to persuade the Labour MPs to join their ranks with promises of safe seats, front bench status and ample scope for opposition to the Nationalists. Harry Oppenheimer, the influential head of De Beers, invited Alex and his colleague Leo Lovell to his home for talks to see if some satisfactory arrangement could be made to accommodate them, but to no avail. Only one Labour MP, Norman Eaton, who had made his way to parliament as an officer of the white workers' rail union and had for a long time been uneasy about Labour policies, succumbed and jumped at the opportunity to be the United Party candidate for a Durban constituency. By the time of the 1958 elections, the Labour Party was unable to put up more than two candidates –Leo in

Benoni and Alex in Rosettenville. It was clear that they had no hope of holding their seats if opposed by the United Party. They were sadly aware of the fact that, because of the alliance with the United Party in three previous elections, the Labour Party had failed to become an independent political force, and had lost its identity as the party of organised labour. Its ageing membership was dwindling, and was confined to a few urban English-speaking constituencies. The character of these constituencies was being changed as increasing numbers of Afrikaner workers supporting the Nationalist Party moved in. Despite this, Alex and Leo refused to abandon the Labour Party -

*'Neither of us desired to join the unhappy and frustrated band of United Party members of parliament who are constantly held in check by their less progressive colleagues. Joining the United Party would have relegated us to share their gloomy silence... We would have fallen into the category of political opportunists ready to perform a somersault on the eve of the election merely to be sure of getting back to parliament by the easiest route.'*<sup>30</sup>

## Left and liberal alliances

Outside parliament, communists whose party had been dissolved in 1950 in the face of the Suppression of Communism Act, and other white left-wingers, formed the Congress of Democrats allied to the ANC in 1953. When he was elected leader Alex had no difficulty in getting the Labour National Executive to agree in establishing cordial relations with the leaders of black political organisations. They had discussions with the Congress leaders and it was agreed that the Labour Party's field of operations should be parliamentary politics, where Labour MPs could exert influence. Labour, represented by Alex, Girlie, and Jessie MacPherson, showed its support for the democratic objectives of the Congress movement by participating in the Congress of the People at Kliptown on 26 June 1955 when the Freedom Charter was adopted, and also attended a meeting to mark the first anniversary of the Charter in 1956.

The Liberal Party of South Africa, founded in 1953, did not participate in the Congress of the People, but it shared the belief in a non-racial democracy. The Party was led by Margaret Ballinger who had worked closely with the Labour MPs while she was one of the Native representatives in parliament. Alex was friendly with her husband, William (Bill) Ballinger, who had come to South Africa from Scotland in the 1920s as representative of the British Trades Union Congress and had been an adviser to Clement Kadalie, leader of the black Industrial and Commercial Union (ICU). The Liberals, with a 'one man one vote' policy were actively canvassing among whites and blacks and in some cases unsuccessfully contesting municipal and provincial elections. In 1956, the Liberal leaders came up with the idea that Alex could attract wide support for the Liberal Party and asked him to throw in his lot with them. Alex recounted that one Liberal artlessly explained 'You are a leader without a party and we are a party without a leader.' Alex declined the invitation, pointing out that the Labour Party was his political home and he could never desert it. Alex was influenced by the absence of a clear economic policy. The Liberal Party had attracted both economic liberals and some social democrats. The former were strong advocates of a capitalist 'free enterprise' economy, which they believed could flourish if racial discrimination was removed. The latter argued for a more socialist orientation. The Party, keen to attract business support (which in fact it failed to achieve), decided not to proclaim any economic

preferences and produced only a vague and obscure economic policy statement. This was unacceptable to Alex, who believed that only a socialist economic order could end racialism which he regarded as a product of capitalism. Alex remained on good terms with the Liberal Party and worked with them in sponsoring and running the Treason Trials Defence Fund and Defence and Aid Fund (see chap 6). The relationship was reflected in a message Alex received from Alan Paton, national chairman of the Liberal Party, on the eve of the 1958 general election: 'Liberal Party South Africa hopes you will triumph Wednesday despite ungenerous and foolish action of United Party in opposing as strong a defender of justice as has ever sat in parliament.'<sup>31</sup>

A few months before the 1958 election, Alex received an invitation from the leaders of the South African Coloured Peoples Organisation (SACPO), an ally of the ANC, to run for election as a candidate in the separate elections for four white representatives of the Coloured people of the Cape, in terms of the Separate Representation of Voters Act, which and finally become law after six years of controversy. Alex informed them that he was opposed to apartheid, wherever applied, and would have nothing to do with the humiliating procedure of coloured people being restricted to voting for four whites to represent them in parliament. He was gratified to learn a few days later that SACPO had decided to boycott the elections. The elections were discredited by the fact that there was only a small turnout of voters on election day, resulting in the election of four United Party candidates who had no legitimacy in the eyes of most Coloured people.

## A humiliating rejection

Having failed to persuade Alex and Leo to join them, the United Party set about eliminating them at the polls. In this they succeeded winning both Rosettenville and Benoni with large majorities. In Rosettenville they overturned Alex's previous majorities so overwhelmingly that he came bottom of the poll (after the Nationalists) and lost his deposit. In 1948 and 1953, the vast majority of voters responded to the call not to split the vote and thereby ensure a victory for the Nationalists. In 1958, the United Party used the same slogan against Alex, accusing him of being a vote-splitter. As it turned out, the only gains the United Party made were against the Labour Party; the Nationalist government benches increased from 94 to 103, at the expense of the United Party, now the only opposition party (apart from the native representatives who were soon to disappear) with a mere 57 members. The United Party had moved to the right, offering only half-hearted opposition against and sometimes outright support for *baasskap* apartheid. South Africa had become, in effect, a one-party state. The Johannesburg *Sunday Express* commented: 'It makes one realise all the more just what a tragedy it is for South Africa that Alex Hepple and Leo Lovell are no longer in the House of Assembly.'<sup>32</sup>

Alex answering the question 'Where does South Africa go from here?' in the Liberal paper *Contact* saw that the end had come for the parliamentary struggle against apartheid:

*'The elections have shattered all hopes that parliament might begin to accommodate itself to non-white progress. The favoured few who enjoy the franchise have made it clear that they have no desire to make parliament a forum for discussions on the rights and aspirations of the non-white majority. They have preferred to give the Nationalist government's mandate to proceed with its repressive policies...'*

*Only the forces outside parliament can save the nation from the evils of this tragic situation. Their following represents more than four-fifths of the population. They lack only organisation and unity...'*

*Now is the time for them to work together, to rally their forces and determine their line of action. There must be clear and*

*courageous leadership and strenuous efforts to build a powerful rank and file.*<sup>33</sup>

Although Alex had expected to lose his seat, the humiliation of being deserted by the electorate in such a crushing way took its toll. He wrote: 'I felt deeply hurt by the treatment I received at the hands of the voters of Rosettenville and found little consolation in the many messages of sympathy I received from all over the country.'<sup>34</sup> Within a year he had suffered a heart attack, but undaunted he and Girlie soon immersed themselves in the extra-parliamentary struggle.



Alex addressing a demonstration by nurses in Cape Town against the Nursing Apartheid Bill June 1957

## Chapter 5: Unity is strength

*Come shoulder to shoulder, ere the world grows older!*

*Help lies in nought but thee and me.*

*(William Morris)*

### The Broederbond-Nationalist attack on unions

'The organising of trade unions and the welding of workers' solidarity in the common struggle for a decent life, for economic security and for social justice, are inspiring labours which will bring breathtaking rewards.'<sup>1</sup> This call to action in *Alex's Trade Union Guide for South African Workers*, published by SACTU in 1957, faced what turned out to be insurmountable obstacles in the totalitarian apartheid state. Alex provided an analysis of these barriers to workers' unity in a series of influential pamphlets.

First and foremost, he pointed to the failure of white workers and their unions to support the organisation of African workers. Instead, the majority of white workers supported the racial division of trade unions, swallowing the propaganda that black workers threatened their existence. 'Perhaps', Alex suggested, 'the trade unions might have got around to organising African labourers, had not the mine owners been so insistent upon ousting whites from their jobs to employ lowly paid Africans in their place.'<sup>2</sup> The white workers took the easy line of resistance by demanding a limitation on black employment and in making no effort to enrol black semi-skilled and unskilled workers or to help them form their own unions. The principal unions at the time were craft unions which did not cater for semi-skilled or unpaid workers. White workers believed that they were able to maintain a relatively high standard of life due to their dependence on large numbers of unskilled black labourers. The failure to organise African workers, Alex commented in 1954, is why 'the trade union movement was divided and weak, [and]... has been an easy prey to the dangerous theories of the Broederbond-Nationalist combine.'<sup>3</sup>

The Broederbond, a secret society aiming at Afrikaner domination had, during the 1930s, carefully laid plans to capture the white unions, and to prevent the growth of African and mixed trade unions. From 1938 onwards their main vehicle was the *Blankewerkersbeskermingsbond* (BWBB - white workers protection society) whose membership was restricted to white protestants. The head of the BWBB was Senator Jan de Klerk (father of FW de Klerk, last Nationalist State President), with whom Alex

frequently clashed when he became Nationalist Minister of Labour in 1954. The BWBB's aims included the reservation of jobs on a racial basis, no undesirable contact between white and non-white workers, and the prohibition of racially mixed unions. The leaders of the 'purified National party', which the Broederbond spawned, announced in 1942 that they wanted all wage determination to be in the hands of the state, and declared that the system of collective bargaining introduced in 1924 by the National-Labour Pact government had 'outlived its usefulness.'<sup>4</sup> The Nationalists' manifesto for the 1948 election included a labour policy with strong authoritarian overtones. In *Trade Unions in Travail* (1954), Alex gave an enlightening account, supported by documents which he had uncovered, as to how the BWBB had taken over the Mineworkers' Union, the majority of whose members were Afrikaners, turning it into a 'Christian-National' union. The Union had resigned from the SA Trades and Labour Council (SATLC), a federation of unions, on the grounds of 'communistic' influences and the presence in its ranks of 'coloured and native delegates.'

Alex described how the BWBB next assaulted the Garment Workers' Union, most of whose white members were Afrikaner women. Their general secretary was ES (Solly) Sachs, a Labour Party colleague whom Alex described as skilful in training these women in trade union organisation and administration.<sup>5</sup> Sachs had managed to establish a non-racial sense of class solidarity that led to substantial wage increases and a reduction in working hours for all workers. The Afrikaner women were subjected by the BWBB and other Afrikaner cultural organisations to emotional appeals to protect themselves from 'un-Afrikaner' 'un-Christian' and 'communistic' influences – Sachs was a secular Jew and had been expelled by the Communist Party. In spite of these appeals, the women remained loyal to Sachs, who won numerous libel actions against his attackers. A rowdy Nationalist mob was sent to break up one of the union's meetings attended by 3,000 members in 1948, and the newly elected Nationalist government used this as a pretext to investigate the union. The Commission sat for a year but was unable to provide any evidence to support direct action against Sachs. It was only later that they were able to use arbitrary powers, under the Suppression of Communism Act, to oust him.

The next union to be subjected to a 'Christian-National' campaign was the Amalgamated Union of Building Trade Workers, whose leaders were accused of being 'communistically inclined' because they had supported the full legal recognition of African unions. Then it was the turn of the Leatherworkers' Union, which had white and coloured members. A small minority of white members, having failed to get their candidate for general secretary elected, set up a rival union for whites only. Once again, the Nationalist Government was able to use the Suppression of Communism Act to

remove Piet Huyser and Willie Kalk, elected leaders of the Building and Leatherworkers' unions respectively. Many other able and experienced trade union leaders were ousted by banning orders, 'to make it easier for pro-government and docile aspirants to take over.'<sup>6</sup> By the end of 1955 no less than 65 key trade union officials had been removed by ministerial decree.

These attacks on trade unions proved to be the prelude to a massive Bill in 1954 to amend the Industrial Conciliation Bill. This prohibited the formation of new racially mixed trade unions, compelled existing mixed unions to segregate their members in racial sections; prohibited racially mixed trade union meetings; excluded coloured members from mixed union executives; and empowered the Minister to reserve jobs on a racial basis. A provision aimed at the Labour Party, whose mainstay since 1908 had been its trade union affiliates, made it illegal for unions to continue affiliation to political parties or to give them financial assistance. In his articles and speeches, Alex exposed the real purpose of the Nationalists to divide and destroy the trade unions:

*'Using workers' apathy and colour prejudice as their major weapon, the Nats are now fulfilling their ambition of the last twenty years. That ambition was to break the power of organised workers. The Nats have hated the free association, democratic independence and bargaining power of the trade unions. They wanted stooge unions to whine for charity and favours and to be embraced in agencies of the Nationalist Party.'*<sup>7</sup>

## Failure of white unions

Alex and his Labour colleagues, Hymie Davidoff and Leo Lovell, put up a fierce resistance to the Bill at all stages. In committee they moved more than 100 amendments, none of which were accepted by the government. Alex struggled behind the scenes to persuade the divided and disrupted union movement to put up a united front against the Bill. A 'unity conference' was belatedly convened in May 1955 attended by more than 260 delegates from 72 unions. Over the years the unions had drifted so far apart that by this time there were no less than six federations and several unaffiliated unions. This included the SATLC, which had several black union affiliates, although there was a feeling among these affiliates that they were second-class members.<sup>8</sup> After lengthy deliberations at the conference, at which Alex was an observer, it was decided to form a stronger federation called the South African Trade Union Council (SATUC).<sup>9</sup> No specific decision was taken on how to resist the Nationalist government's attack but it was resolved that the new federation would not admit African unions or mixed unions with African members. The SATUC leaders sought a compromise, offering to accept the imposition of segregation if the government would remove the job reservation clause from the Bill and treat it as a separate piece of legislation. Not unexpectedly, the Government rejected this compromise out of hand. This, said Alex, 'exposed the great weakness of the registered trade unions, revealing that the government had succeeded in intimidating the unions by banning leaders and refusing compromise on apartheid. Thereafter there was no danger that the [registered] unions...would obstruct the National Party road to the disciplined Christian-National republican state.'<sup>10</sup>

Alex commented further: 'Not even the fact that their disunity was the very weakness that had made them easy prey to their enemies could provoke many delegates into defensive unity through compromise.'<sup>11</sup> Alex described as 'one of the most shattering experiences in my life' when the SATUC representatives came and gave evidence to the select committee. Alex later told interviewers:

*'The Nationalist members of the committee were quite jubilant and they said to me, but where are all your friends that were going to do this that and the other? I had been fighting it in Parliament and*

*I had warned of all sorts of dire results from the trade unionists and that never eventuated. The trade unions when it came to the showdown, there was hardly a whisper from them<sup>12</sup>*

Alex attributed their attitude to the 'fear of the majority of white trade union leaders of their rank and file.'<sup>13</sup> They operated closed shops, with the employer deducting trade union subscriptions. They never held rank and file conferences, and branch meetings were poorly attended. The leaders found it expedient to dodge the real issues in order to keep peace and unity among their racist members. In order to appease the right-wing unions, they excluded African unions but not registered unions with coloured or Indian members. At the second annual conference of the SATUC, in early 1956, after an eight-hour secret session – from which the press was excluded but a representative of the Department of Labour was allowed to take notes – it was resolved that the passing of the Act was a foregone conclusion, and that it was their duty 'to obey the law of the land.' In a press interview, Alex said that the SATUC had 'thrown in the towel', and abandoned all plans to protest at the third reading of the Bill.<sup>14</sup> In his third reading speech, Alex said that the white unions had not asserted themselves in a forthright manner:

*That is to be very much regretted because the workers of South Africa are going to rue this day. . . The insidious racial propaganda and the machinations of the Nationalists in the last decade in the trade union movement have befuddled many trade union leaders and duped the rank and file, but that is not enough to give the Nationalists permanent victory over the workers.<sup>15</sup>*

The SATUC General-Secretary, Tom Rutherford, responded with a press statement denouncing Alex's comments as 'insulting' and 'untrue' and sent him a furious telegram: 'TUC officials deplore your reported irresponsible attack.'<sup>16</sup> In a polite but firm reply, Alex again expressed his 'disappointment and frustration' and warned that the SATUC was 'taking grave risks with its future if it believes unity can be preserved merely by compromise or the sidestepping of contentious issues among its own members.'<sup>17</sup> Rutherford then became more conciliatory and replied defensively: 'As the picture unfolds in the future, and you come to know the true facts, you will be amazed that the TUC was able to put up any fight at all.'<sup>18</sup> This seemed to underline the disunity within the SATUC. Subsequent events showed that the hope of the SATUC that the

colour-bar sop to Nationalist-controlled unions would keep all white unions within the fold was misguided. The pro-apartheid unions remained in their own federations eventually linking up as the South African Confederation of Labour.

The supine behaviour of the SATUC enabled the Government to take ever more dictatorial powers to enforce racial job reservation. In 1959 they introduced legislation to amend section 77 of the Industrial Conciliation Act (the so-called 'safeguard against inter-racial competition'). The amendment gave the Minister of Labour arbitrary powers to disregard industrial council (i.e. collective) agreements and to impose segregation without industrial council consent. His decisions could not be challenged in the courts. Alex commented that 'by promising the white workers racial security, the government is extracting from them in return every right and freedom that is essential to their economic security.'<sup>19</sup>



Alex (right) with Herbert Morrison (Deputy Leader) and Jim Crawford (TUC) at the British Labour Party conference 1954.

## Helping non-racial unions

After African unions were excluded from the SATUC, Alex took part in discussions with leaders of African and other non-white unions. They first considered reviving the old SATLC which had been open to all unions. But this came to nothing because under the 1956 Act a federation of registered unions could no longer be non-racial. Accordingly, they decided to set up a separate organisation. This led to the establishment, with Alex's active support and advice, of the non-racial South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU). Membership was open to unions catering for workers of all races, but it was predominantly comprised of African workers. At its first annual conference held in Cape Town on 3 March 1956, Alex was a guest speaker. He said: 'my sympathies lie heavily with SACTU because it has no colour bar and thus makes the possibilities of working-class unity greater than any other federation.'<sup>20</sup> Referring to the Industrial Conciliation Bill, he said that 'today the workers of South Africa of all colours are reaping the harvest of the crimes that were committed in the past.' The awful result of 'keeping politics out of trade unions' was the imposition of the politics of the Nationalist Government. The prime task today was to organise all unorganised workers, and to educate them in trade unionism. He told the delegates that they could get inspiration from history:

*'They should remember the despair and helplessness which faced the British worker at the time of the Industrial Revolution. Conditions of workers then were even worse than those of Africans today. All that has changed. Today the trade unions in Britain are an essential part of society. Let it be an inspiration to every one of you. The light is there. It needs leaders like you to show the workers that light.'*<sup>21</sup>

In an interview he gave two American academics in 1964,<sup>22</sup> Alex dispelled the myth spread by some opponents of SACTU that it was established by the Congress of Democrats or the ANC. This he said was 'absolutely untrue.' He 'supported very strongly' SACTU's policy statement that organising the mass of workers for higher wages, better conditions of life and labour, was 'inextricably bound up with a determined struggle for political rights'. The 'fire and drive' for SACTU to join the Congress movement had not come from outside – only after SACTU joined the Alliance did the ANC encourage workers to join unions – but from 'the politically motivated Africans within SACTU', such as Leslie Massina of the African Laundry Cleaning and Dyeing Workers' Union, who became SACTU's first general secretary and later a treason trialist. Alex had not heard any voices within SACTU who opposed joining the Congress Alliance. However, SACTU's affiliation with the Congress Alliance, and its links with the communist-led

World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU),<sup>23</sup> was used as the excuse for setting up of the Federation of Free African Trade Unions (FOFATUSA), which claimed to be 'non-political'. Alex told his interviewers in 1964 that he believed two groups were behind this. The first was the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), which had split from the WFTU and was fiercely anti-communist. 'The temptation of financial support' from the ICFTU 'was tremendously important' in setting up FOFATUSA which joined and got funds from the ICFTU, with the encouragement of the British TUC. The irony of this was that Lucy Mvubelo, the person who initially moved that SACTU should affiliate to the WFTU, was the only SACTU executive member to break from SACTU and join FOFATUSA.<sup>24</sup> Secondly, said Alex, these unions had a political objective although they denied it. They were connected to the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) which had broken away from the ANC. Alex discussed this with ICFTU representatives. He had seen FOFATUSA's vast correspondence file, and read in some of this correspondence 'a report of activities that were quite unknown to anybody in the trade union movement in South Africa'. He told the ICFTU that they had been misled and that they did not quite understand what FOFATUSA's involvement in politics was. He told interviewers:

*'What disturbed me about FOFATUSA was that there was a handful of people at the top, but I could never make contact with rank and file, with membership or delegate conferences, or anything. They were always terribly evasive and I got them together one day and said, "Look, I believe there is room for plenty of trade union activity among Africans in this country; you don't like SACTU, by all means form FOFATUSA, form anything, but the job to do is to organise African workers into trade unions, because it is only through their strength in the trade union movement that they can make any real demand for legal recognition of African trade unions in this country, and of equal recognition, to belong to any trade union of [a worker's] choosing." Well I could never really get to grips with them on this particular issue because the real driving force was [Jacob] Nyaose who was one of the PAC men who went to jail for three years, and the other was Lucy Mvubelo of the Garment Workers' Union [of African women], and Sarah Chtija, also of the Garment Workers... I think it is fair to say that the direction and control of that union is in the hands of the white union.'*<sup>25</sup>

He added that other FOFATUSA unions –the small [African] Tobacco Workers' Union,

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the Motor Industry Employees' Union and the Sweet Workers' Union – were 'mainly satellites of white unions'. He found it difficult to understand how FOFATUSA could follow the official policy of the PAC that Africans should not form any alliances with whites, while these unions were subservient to white unions.

Alex had an invitation almost every year to open SACTU's annual conference. He went there as an expert on labour matters and a sympathiser of African unions. His role was well-known to the delegates. He always got an enthusiastic welcome, and on every occasion the attendance was enormous. He took an active part in training officials. He disagreed with some of SACTU's activities, for example he thought it was a mistake to get involved in cold war politics by the proposed affiliation with the WFTU and urged SACTU to maintain links with the ICFTU as well. But he found that as trade unionists the leaders of SACTU operated 'intelligently and conscientiously'. 'Of course they weren't a lot of saints... There were a lot of individuals that I found quite impossible and I thought should never have been anywhere near the trade union movement. But taken by and large, I say that SACTU looked upon purely from a trade union standpoint was comparable with the best of white registered trade unions.'<sup>26</sup>

After he left parliament, Alex and Girlie worked part-time for the Garment Workers' Union bringing out the union's newspaper. Alex also accepted appointment from 1958 as chief negotiator for the SACTU-affiliated Textile Workers' Union, which was desperately short of personnel because of banning orders.<sup>27</sup> He felt at home in this part-time job because of his own trade union and business experience. He had several successes in negotiating wage rises not only for the white and Coloured members of the registered union but also of the African textile workers. A wages committee was set up by 14 organisations in 1959 under the chairmanship of the Bishop of Johannesburg, Ambrose Reeves. Alex was appointed chairman of a sub-committee to write a pamphlet, *Poverty Wages*, setting out clearly and simply the shamefully low wages being paid to African workers, and proposing a number of practical steps to secure higher wages. A number of African unions came to Alex for assistance and advice in drawing up wage claims. When they did so, they gave him a mass of information regarding discrimination, in particular the way in which jobs nominally 'reserved' for whites were in fact done by Africans at much lower rates of pay. It was obvious from the information given to him that SACTU organisers, unlike those from FOFATUSA, had contact with workers in factories and that the grievances they were handling came from the shop floor. It was also clear that the work of the organisers was extremely difficult. Not only could they not get access to workers, especially those

in compounds, but employers were unwilling to talk to them or were afraid to do so because of pressure from the Department of Labour and the police. Sometimes, when there was a 'registered' (i.e. non-African) union in the industry, a white official could go and speak to the employer and put the case for the African workers, but direct negotiations with African unions were rare. Strikes by African workers were illegal, and those who were sacked faced not only unemployment but also exclusion from the urban areas under the pass laws.

By 1962, SACTU had 51 affiliated unions with over 53,000 members, three-fifths of them catering for African workers. But the organisation faced increasing state persecution. In the 1960 state of emergency, hundreds of SACTU leaders and members were detained for up to 5 months without trial, including Leon Levy, the President, and Leslie Massina, the General Secretary. Several other leaders left the country to continue their work in exile. I was then working voluntarily for SACTU as co-editor of *Workers' Unity* and legal adviser, and was given sole authority to manage the affairs of the organisation during the emergency. Although the ANC had been banned, SACTU remained nominally legal but we found it necessary to conduct business in secret from the offices of the detained lawyer Shulamith Muller with the help of her personal assistant, Shirley Goldsmith, whom I married in July 1960. I was able to rely in running SACTU on the advice and practical assistance of Alex and Girlie, together with the acting General Secretary, Don Mateman, Mark Shope of the Laundry Workers' union, Shanti Naidoo and Rita Ndzanga. According to Luckhardt and Wall, SACTU's official biographers, 'during the emergency the organisation not only survived but scored some of its most crowning achievements.'<sup>28</sup> These included the mass £1 a day campaign and the presentation of wage claims to employers with Alex's assistance. A letter-writing campaign led to growing international support for SACTU, including the establishment of an international solidarity committee. SACTU repeatedly challenged the credentials of the South African workers' delegates at the annual International Labour conferences, who represented only white trade unions. This campaign was of crucial importance in getting the ILO to adopt a resolution at its conference in June 1961 calling on South Africa to withdraw from the ILO. Continuing international pressure resulted in South Africa's withdrawal in March 1964. Alex had been trying for years to get the British TUC to take a public stand, and it was only in 1961, with his active encouragement, that they openly supported SACTU.

Harassment continued after the end of the emergency, with police raids on union offices and the continued banning of officials from trade union work. SACTU meetings were banned for three months in 1961. The period from 1962 onwards was one of massive repression. SACTU activities had increasingly to be conducted underground; meetings were in secret often on the move in motor vehicles or in the countryside

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in order to avoid police surveillance. More than 50 officials were banned from 1963 onwards and 31 officials were detained without trial under the so-called 'sabotage' laws. Many were tortured and some died in detention such as Lawrence Ndzanga, Caleb Mayekiso, Elijah Loza and 'Looksmart' S Ngudle. Alex and Girlie's role increasingly became to support the victims of repression and to inform the world what was happening.

## Chapter 6: Cry out aloud

*And we, shall we too crouch and quail,  
Ashamed, afraid of strife,  
And lest our lives untimely fail  
Embrace the death in life?  
Nay, cry out aloud, and have no fear,  
We few against the world;  
Awake, arise! The hope we bear  
Against the curse is hurled.  
(William Morris)*

### Treason Trial and Defence and Aid Funds

On 27 September 1955, special branch police collected me from the office where I worked as an attorney's articled clerk and took me back to the flat in Marble Arch, Hillbrow, where I lived with my parents. They had a search warrant to find evidence of treason, sedition and other political offences. Alex and Girlie were not named in the warrant, so Alex insisted that they could search only my room. The irony of this was that Alex and Girlie had attended the Congress of the People, when the Freedom Charter – viewed as treasonable by the Government – was adopted, and also a meeting on the first anniversary of the Charter, while I had studiously stayed away so as to protect my role in the underground movement. When the police arrived at the flat, my mother disappeared into the toilet complaining of an upset stomach. In fact she was flushing away the whole 400 pages of Engel's *Anti-Dühring*, a banned book, which I had carelessly left under my bed! The police were not very discriminating in their search for evidence of treason. The receipt shows that among the other documents they took were pamphlets about Olive Schreiner (the writer), copies of the British *New Statesman* journal, and a postcard of 'beautiful Ghana.' A friend, a teacher at the Central Indian High School, had a Chinese dressing gown covered with dragons and figures seized. One of the detectives explained to her: 'You never know what all these symbols mean. We had better take that thing away!'<sup>1</sup>

Ours was just one of nearly 400 private homes and offices searched – it turned out that the raid was a preliminary to the Treason Trial. In the small hours of the morning of 5 December 1956, 156 leading Congress activists of all races were arrested on charges of high treason. This marked the beginning of the Treason Trial, which lasted four and

a half years; it demonstrated the lengths to which the Government was prepared to go to intimidate and destroy opponents of its policies of apartheid. At the request of Chief Luthuli and other Congress leaders, Alex took the initiative in launching the Treason Trial Defence Fund and inviting prominent citizens to give their support, to raise money for the legal defence of the accused and for the maintenance of their families. The idea of establishing such a fund had been germinating since the September 1955 raids. It appeared obvious to Alex and others that the Government was contemplating some form of mass trials. Alex wrote and spoke to several people, asking if they would sponsor a defence fund and, during the 1956 parliamentary session, he endeavoured to discover the Government's intentions by raising the matter of the raids with the Minister of Justice, CR Swart, who confirmed that the police were investigating treason. Alan Paton and Leo Lovell MP agreed to be sponsors, but Alex decided to take no further action until the Government made its next move. As soon as news of the arrests became known, Alex resumed his earlier efforts and contacted a number of prominent people including Ambrose Reeves, then Bishop of Johannesburg. Within 24 hours of the arrests Canon John Collins had cabled Reeves to tell him that Christian Action would raise enough money to ensure the best possible defence for the accused and aid for their dependents. Alex became chairman of the management committee, and a Board of Trustees was established including Reeves, ex-judge Frank Lucas, Alan Paton, and Dr Ellen Hellman of the South African Institute of Race Relations. Alex arranged for the offices of the Labour Party in Kerk Street, Johannesburg, to be used as the Fund's headquarters. Funds were collected from sympathisers in South Africa, and money also began to pour into Christian Action from Britain, Ireland, the Scandinavian countries, Holland, Australia, Canada and elsewhere.

Alex was under special branch surveillance. For example, an express delivery letter to him, posted on 13 December 1956 in London, from John Hatch, Commonwealth officer of the British Labour Party, offering funds for the trialists that would be filtered through the SALP, was mysteriously delayed. It bore a postmark as having been received in Johannesburg General Post Office at 4.30 am on 15 December and a second postmark of 'Hillbrow- 19 December'. It was pushed under Alex's door at 5pm on 19 December. The five-day delay in forwarding the express letter to a sub-post office one mile away from the GPO, led Alex to complain to the Postmaster-General that the letter had been tampered with probably by the special branch, a complaint that was never satisfactorily answered.

At the beginning of the preparatory examination at the Johannesburg Drill Hall on 20 December 1956, Alex had a confrontation with the police. He was listening in the

public gallery when he received a verbal message that a Mr Ngakane of the Institute of Race Relations was outside and wished to speak to him urgently. There was a large crowd gathered outside. Ngakane told him that he had given a note to one of the constables to take to the court officials asking to be let into the Hall. The constable took the note and returned to Ngakane some time later with the note torn in shreds. Alex spoke to the constable who said that a Major van den Bergh had torn up the note. Alex did not know Major van den Bergh or what he looked like. He could not find van den Bergh but complained to the officer in charge, Colonel Grobler, to whom he handed the shredded note. Shortly afterwards Alex heard Grobler order the police to clear the streets. Alex witnessed baton charges upon the crowd and firing by the police. He and Bishop Reeves, who had by now joined him, spoke to Grobler asking for the police to withdraw and offering to speak to the crowd which was becoming very angry at the rough treatment they were receiving. But the baton charges continued. Alex later produced affidavits in Parliament from many people who had been assaulted by the police. He said that the events he had witnessed were 'a disgrace to South Africa'.<sup>2</sup> He asked for a judicial inquiry but this fell on deaf ears.

The police retaliation against Alex came in the form of a demand from the Deputy State Attorney for £1000 damages for an alleged defamation of Major van den Bergh in an interview Alex and Bishop Reeves had given to the *Rand Daily Mail* on the night of the events outside the Drill Hall.<sup>3</sup> On the advice of Issy Maisels QC, leader of the defence lawyers, Alex denied making any defamatory remarks and repudiated liability. The *Rand Daily Mail*, however, published an apology to van den Bergh.<sup>4</sup> The case against Alex was dropped. Van den Bergh, who had been interned during the War as a member of the pro-Nazi *Ossewabrandwag*, was to rise to the rank of General in the security police and eventually became head of South Africa's own Gestapo, the powerful and sinister Bureau of State Security (BOSS).

The trial ended on 29 March 1961 when the remaining 30 defendants were acquitted.

Even before then it had become clear that the Treason Trial was only the beginning of a ruthless campaign by the Government to crush all effective democratic opposition to apartheid. In 1959, the defendants had a meeting in the Darragh Hall, Johannesburg with Alex and others working for the Fund to review the position. At the suggestion of Chief Luthuli, Alex was asked to prepare plans for the establishment of a permanent fund for the defence of those charged with political offences. The new fund was to come into existence at the end of the Treason Trial, but the shooting at Sharpeville on 21 March 1960 and the state of emergency that followed brought it into being a

year earlier, as the South African Defence and Aid Fund. Its terms of reference were modelled on those of Canon Collins' Defence and Aid Fund in Britain, from which it received most of its funds. It provided legal defence and aid for the dependents of persons arrested or charged with any political offence under racially discriminatory laws. As with the Treason Trial Fund, the Labour party offices were used by the new Fund. Alex was chairman until September 1964.

In March 1966, the Government issued a proclamation declaring the Defence and Aid Fund to be an unlawful organisation. David Craighead, Alex's successor as chairman of the Fund, and Laura Hitchins, the secretary, were placed under banning orders. The State information department tried to justify the ban on grounds that the Fund was engaged in a communist conspiracy and that its funds were used to finance the ANC and Communist Party. Alex, by then living in London, thought it necessary to write personally to a number of donors including the British Trades Union Congress (TUC) and the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) to assure them that funds they had donated were used solely to provide legal aid to those arrested and for the welfare of their dependents. The TUC and ICFTU accepted his assurances and continued their support through other avenues.<sup>5</sup> The International Defence and Aid Fund (IDAF), based in London, continued to provide tens of millions of pounds to support the victims of apartheid. The story of this 'secret war against apartheid' has been graphically described by Denis Herbstein.<sup>6</sup> The foundations had been laid in South Africa by Alex and the many others who had built up a network of contacts and supporters.

Alex and Girlie had a close friendship with Bishop Ambrose Reeves. This began with the establishment of the Treason Trial Defence Fund in 1956. Alex found that Reeves was dedicated and dependable, sparing no effort to ensure the success of the Fund, in raising money, consulting the accused and arranging for their defence and for the needs of their families. In 1959, Alex joined a committee of fourteen organisations set up by Reeves to examine current problems and exchange views. Alex was distressed when the Bishop fled to Swaziland after the declaration of a state of emergency in 1960. He had not expected it and thought that it was mistaken. Reeves phoned him from Mbabane to explain that he had decided to leave South Africa because he feared being arrested. Alex wished he could have spoken to him sooner to dissuade him from going. However, the die was cast and it was too late. Alex remained sympathetic to Reeves' position and understood the reasons why he had hurriedly left. Alex concluded, in the light of subsequent events, that his going when he did probably made no difference. It was only a matter of time before the Government would have silenced him one way or another.<sup>7</sup>

## A Labour newspaper

In this period of repression Alex and Girlie revived the weekly Labour newspaper *Forward*. This was the culmination of efforts over many years to establish a regular Labour newspaper.

In 1952, Alex had been closely involved in setting up *Saamtrek* ('pull together') described as 'the workers' own newspaper'. The paper was born out of the ban imposed by the Government on ES (Solly) Sachs, secretary of the Garment Workers' Union which prohibited him from being an officer, office-bearer or member of any union and from attending gatherings. Sachs thought that there might be a way around the ban, by undertaking the publication of a newspaper for workers, something for which the unions had hankered for years. He did not wait for the main union federation, the SA Trades and Labour Council (SATLC), to give the venture their official blessing. He went ahead and only when a dummy first issue had been prepared, did he ask for the SATLC's financial and organisational support. Sachs realised that the unions were poor and that the paper would have to depend upon commercial advertising for its primary income. His early success in securing advertising led the SATLC to go ahead with the venture and set up a publishing company (Unity Publications (Pty) Ltd). Alex was a member of the Board of Directors and contributed a regular parliamentary column.

The first issue of *Saamtrek*, a bilingual (English and Afrikaans) weekly tabloid paper, appeared on 5 September 1952. The Government was obviously worried. Ben Schoeman, Minister of Labour, issued a 'warning' to workers not to be misled by the apparently non-political character of the first issue, and pointed to an article by Solly Sachs.<sup>8</sup> The editor was Dawie Couzyn, an idealistic young Afrikaner journalist committed to establishing a voice for progressive unions. At this early stage future difficulties were soon apparent. Although not officially owned or controlled by the SATLC, Carl Rehm, Piet Huyser, Dulcie Hartwell, and Anna Scheepers, leading SATLC officials were on the Board. There was uncertainty as to where final accountability lay, highlighted by clashes between Couzyn, Rehm and Huyser about editorial matters. Couzyn and Alex also had differences with Bennie Sachs (Solly's brother), whom Solly had unilaterally appointed as business manager after he lost his appeal to the courts against the banning order and decided to leave the country. Bennie described *Saamtrek* as 'a trade union newspaper financed by the advertisements of Jewish merchants – a monstrosity that doesn't deserve to live.'<sup>9</sup> The Board was, understandably, unwilling to confirm his appointment.

## A Labour newspaper

Although circulation had reached over 40,000 per week by March 1954, and the contents maintained a high standard, the paper was in a poor financial situation. Alex gave a personal financial guarantee of £1,000 to the printers. He believed that the underlying problem was that the unions had failed to give the paper the support it needed, some because they were being crippled by government bans on their officials, others because they were sympathetic to apartheid and hostile to the progressive editorial line. In March 1954 Alex had to intervene to prevent Couzyn's resignation – Couzyn described Alex as 'the ray of light in the darkness and [you] have kept me from utter disillusionment.'<sup>10</sup> In November 1954, at the time of the transfer of sponsorship from the SATLC to the new South African Trade Union Council (SATUC), the SATUC demanded that their editorial committee should sanction all editorial matter before publication. The previous *Saamtrek* policy pledging support for 'a progressive policy towards all sections of working people, without any distinction,' was to be jettisoned. Couzyn refused to accept these new requirements and his contract was terminated.<sup>11</sup> Alex had, by then, left the Board. The paper soldiered on, under new editorship, until February 1957 and was replaced by a monthly SATUC magazine called *Unitas*.

There had been an earlier Labour newspaper. In December 1924, *Forward: voice of the people*, began publication. The owners were Gabriel Weinstock and Louis Karnovsky, who had achieved notoriety for chaining themselves to the railings in the gallery of



Cartoons by Ashton (Saamtrek) and Bob Connolly(Rand Daily Mail) portraying opposition to Industrial Conciliation Bill 1954.

parliament protesting against unemployment. The first editor was Harry Haines, former organiser of the Transvaal Miners' Association. From 1939-42, the editor was Colin Legum, and he was succeeded by FL Davy of the Johannesburg *Sunday Times*. Legum moved on to become editor of the SALP's official organ *Labour Bulletin* (1943-44) later called the *Illustrated Labour Bulletin* (1945-47), before joining the *London Observer*. Publication of *Forward* ceased in 1947, and in 1948 Weinstock offered the paper to the SALP to become their official organ. The offer was accepted but the necessary funds could not be raised. It was only in 1952, after further transfers of ownership, that an agreement was reached between the SALP and the then owners, Triangle Press (Pty) Ltd, to make *Forward*, the 'official organ' of the Party.

There was a good deal of friction between Alex, as Leader of the Party, and Edgar Bernstein, the editor, over the reporting of Labour policy and dissensions within the parliamentary Labour caucus on the coloured voters' issue.<sup>12</sup> Bernstein, for his part, complained that members of the Party were not supporting the paper. He claimed that, although there was a small increase in circulation, this did not come from Labour supporters and some advertisers with union links had been lost.<sup>13</sup> Alex responded that he too was having difficulties 'in getting members of the [Labour] team to do the slightest thing'.<sup>14</sup> Matters came to a head in early 1956 in sharp exchanges between Alex, Bernstein and Hugo Schilsky, director of the owning company,<sup>15</sup> and in May 1956 the editor announced that *Forward* had severed its links with the SALP and would in future be 'independent' because readers were not interested in party political issues.<sup>16</sup> In January 1958 it was relaunched as the *Forward and Eagle*, but the venture failed and the owning company was placed in liquidation.

Publication was suspended until 1962 when the title was sold to a company of which Alex, and Jessie MacPherson (former chair of the SALP) were controlling shareholders and directors. Alex was the editor. The funding came from the proceeds of the sale of the SALP's asset, the Malvern Labour Hall, together with donations from supporters, and a personal financial contribution by Alex and Girlie. The paper was run on a non-profit basis; all the writing, editing and technical work was done by Alex and Girlie and other volunteers. The paper avoided the requirement under the recently passed General Law Amendment Act 1962 (the 'Sabotage Act') to make a deposit of R20,000 because *Forward* had been registered before the Act came into force, and its publication had been only temporarily suspended.

The first issue of the new series (July 1962) declared that '*Forward* will not only serve the interests of the labour movement. It also hopes to play its part in preserving the

freedom of the press and all other freedoms.' This was a period in which left-wing and liberal publications –such as *New Age*,<sup>17</sup> *Spark*, *Fighting Talk*, and *Contact* – were being banned, and the deposit requirement in the Sabotage Act was intended to prevent their revival. Alex and Girlie realised that *Forward*, too, would be a target for suppression, and that they would have to tread warily through the maze of censorship laws. Publishing a radical paper at this time was an act of defiance. In 1960, on the eve of a new censorship law, Alex had written and published a pamphlet, *Censorship and Press Control in South Africa*, in which he said: 'we must not surrender the freedom of the Press nor meekly accept the tyranny of censorship.'<sup>18</sup> Alex and Girlie were putting this belief into practice. They did not escape police attention. Their telephones were bugged, and their sellers were intimidated. Gerard Ludi, who passed himself off as a leftist reporter on the *Rand Daily Mail*, submitted a cartoon and an article on the media which was published in the July 1964 issue. Alex and Girlie were deeply shocked when they discovered, a few months later, that he was a police spy.

The eight-page paper appeared monthly for 26 issues. There were regular articles on issues such as poverty wages and trade union rights. As the repression intensified, the coverage of trials and detentions increased. *Forward* was the only paper to publish lists of all the 800 persons detained under the Sabotage Act (which allowed detention without trial) up to October 1964, and details of ongoing political trials. There were political commentaries by well-known journalists such as their friend Stanley Uys, an article by Jessie MacPherson on 'The need for socialism in South Africa', critiques of legal developments and of the Mandela incitement trial by myself (under the pseudonyms of 'Jurist' and 'Gracchus'), an appeal by Athol Fugard to overseas playwrights not to allow their plays to be performed in South Africa before racially segregated audiences, and book and art reviews by the writer Lionel Morrison.

Publication of *Forward* ceased in December 1964. The many severe restrictions on press freedom and police harassment made the task of editing a small under-financed publication of this kind almost impossible. There was the serious risk that, at any time, the Minister could close the paper down on the pretext that it was publishing views 'calculated' to further the aims of statutory 'communism', a definition wide enough to cover any criticism of the government which implied support for extra-parliamentary struggle. It proved to be difficult to increase circulation, and the trade unions on which Alex had depended for support had become increasingly fearful and unwilling to come to the paper's aid.



Cartoon by Ashton in *Saamtrek*, 'Met die Vlag Omhoog' after the ascent of Everest in 1953, portraying Labour as holding the flag of the freedom of the worker against economic exploitation and interference with human rights.

## Family matters

There were also personal reasons for relinquishing the paper. The years from July 1963 onwards were difficult times for Alex and Girlie not only due to intensified government repression but also because of my involvement in the underground struggle. I was arrested, together with some of the ANC, SACP and MK leaders, on 11 July 1963 at their secret headquarters at Liliesleaf Farm, Rivonia, and detained without trial in solitary confinement for three months.<sup>19</sup> I was subsequently put on trial with Mandela and nine others on charges of conspiracy to commit sabotage.

My parents were kept ignorant of my underground activities, although they must have had their suspicions – I was not infrequently warned by them to ‘be careful’, to remember that ‘walls have ears’, and – based on their own experience - to be cautious in working with some of the communists whom they said would use me and abandon me when I had served my purpose. On the day of my arrest, I had been using a car registered in my father’s name. The police gave him a hard time trying unsuccessfully to implicate him. Alex managed to secure an interview with BJ Vorster, Minister of Justice, to raise concerns about my treatment and that of other detainees. Vorster told him bluntly that we all faced the death penalty.

Alex sought the help of Issy Maisels QC, leading defence advocate in the Treason Trial, who put pressure on the prosecutor, Dr Percy Yutar, to release me on the grounds that I was only a minor character in the alleged sabotage conspiracy and should not be put on trial with the leaders. All the white accused men in the subsequent Rivonia trial of Mandela and others were of Jewish heritage and Yutar, a leading member of the Jewish community, was keen to punish them for, in his view, endangering the Jews by antagonising the Nationalist government. When it became apparent that the first indictment was about to be quashed by the presiding Judge, Yutar sought a political advantage by announcing that he was withdrawing the charges against me, but intended to call me as the first state witness. I was released, but managed to flee the country on 22 November 1963, with the help of Bram Fischer and the underground network, so frustrating Yutar’s plans to call me as a state witness. Mandela and seven others were sentenced to life imprisonment in June 1964.

When Bram Fischer and I planned my escape from South Africa, we knew that it was likely that my wife Shirley, who had herself been active in the Congress of Democrats, would be detained indefinitely as a hostage. So we took the decision that she should accompany me. It was a hazardous journey across the fence into the neighbouring

Bechuanaland Protectorate (now Botswana) and then, pursued by agents of the South African security police, to Tanzania. We could not expose our children, Brenda, aged 2 years, and Paul, 11 months, to the risks. So a few days before we left we met Alex and Girlie and Shirley's parents, Minnie and Morrie Goldsmith, who agreed to take care of the children. We kissed the children and our parents goodbye, not knowing when we would be reunited. Fortunately, Minnie was able to bring the children to us in London six weeks later. Alex wound up our affairs in Johannesburg.

We were a close family, and it was a tragic, stressful and lonely time for all of us because we knew we could not return to South Africa for as long as the apartheid regime continued – indeed, as it turned out, I remained a banned person for 27 years until the day after Mandela's release in February 1990. After much anxious consideration, Alex and Girlie sold up their home in the Johannesburg suburb of Kensington and came to Britain in February 1965. They were undecided as to whether to return but when Canon John Collins invited them to set up an information service based in London for the International Defence and Aid (IDAF) they decided that this would enable them, now in their 60s to continue a role in the anti-apartheid struggle and at the same time to be reunited with the rest of the family.



Alex and Girlie with Bob and grandchildren, Brenda and Paul, in exile 1967

## Two books

Soon after his arrival in England, Alex found himself in demand as a journalist, author and speaker on South African affairs. His old friend and Labour Party colleague, Colin Legum, was working as *The Observer's* Commonwealth correspondent. At the end of 1964, he got Pall Mall Press to invite Alex to write *South Africa: a political and economic history*, published in 1966 in the Pall Mall Library of African Affairs, which aimed to provide objective and authoritative studies of each African country. Alex had no training as an historian but in his first year in exile, Alex applied himself diligently to the task of reading and re-reading the histories by Eric A Walker, and CW de Kiewet, and JAI Agar-Hamilton, as well as Ellen Hellman's *Handbook of Race Relations*, and Muriel Horrell's *Annual Survey of Race Relations*.

His stated aim was 'to set out a simple account of the historical background of South African society, as a guide to current events in that country.'<sup>20</sup> He tried to show that the real issue in South Africa was an economic one and that most of the racial discrimination practised in South Africa had to do with the exploitation of non-white labour. The first part of the book contained essential information about the people and the economy. The second part covered the events relating to the dispossession of the land occupied by the African population and the role played by Britain as the colonial power in introducing the labour policies which provided the basis of the laws and regulations in force in the apartheid state. The third part of the book outlined the political development from colonial status to an independent, white, oligarchic republic. The final, and strongest, part of the book dealt with the issue with which Alex was most familiar, the labour question. It tells the story of the slaves, 'apprentices' and migrant workers and the coercive measures designed to direct black workers where whites wanted them. This part explained the industrial colour bar and the border industries being promoted by the government. It also included a brief history of the trade union movement.

The book was described by *The Economist* as 'valuable and refreshing for seeing the real issue as economic, not racial.'<sup>21</sup> Nicholas Bosanquet, in *The Statist*, thought that Alex's thesis was 'tendentious' but said it was fortunate that this thesis had led Alex to give a 'detailed and most useful' account of the history and structure of labour

## Two books

relations. Alex, he said, was 'not a scholar, but a man of affairs with a brief to present. He presents it lucidly. Mr Hepple is clearly the kind of public man who likes to do his own homework.'<sup>22</sup> Gwendolen Carter, the distinguished Africanist at Northwestern University, regarded the thesis that the basic problems are economic as 'refreshing' and agreed that the section on labour was 'the most distinctive part of the book.'<sup>23</sup> *The Times Literary Supplement* greeted the book as 'a forceful and clear analysis of the South African situation.'<sup>24</sup> Needless to say, the book was promptly banned by the South African Publications Board, as an 'undesirable' publication. The ban was lifted only in 1987.

Colin Legum was also instrumental in Alex being invited by Penguin Books to write a biography of Dr Hendrik Verwoerd in the series on Political Leaders of the Twentieth Century. Alex was sitting at his desk in Temple Fortune, London, working on the book on 6 September 1966, when it was announced over the radio that Verwoerd had been stabbed to death, while sitting at his desk in parliament, by a deranged parliamentary messenger, Demetrio Tsafendas. Alex said he felt that his subject had died in his arms. It took him several weeks to adjust to the shock and to resume writing now about a dead rather than a living political figure. Alex and Girlie undertook extensive research at the library of the Royal Commonwealth Society and Colindale newspaper library, unearthing many little known facts about Verwoerd.

The book opens with a graphic account of Verwoerd's triumphal return to South Africa in March 1961 after the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' conference, at which the Union of South Africa withdrew from the Commonwealth paving the way to achieve the long-held Nationalist ambition of a white republic. The book showed that Verwoerd's rise to power was no freak. 'It was a logical step in the political evolution of the apartheid society.'<sup>25</sup> Verwoerd possessed 'exceptional qualifications' for leadership of a white minority determined to preserve the subjection of the black majority. The biography revealed how this son of immigrant Dutch parents had become a Doctor of Philosophy at a German university, having submitted a thesis on *The Blunting of the Emotions*; his knowledge of psychology (he held the chair of applied psychology at Stellenbosch University) enabled him to play successfully on the fears of white South Africans, blunting their compassion, and winning their fanatical devotion. He convinced them not only that South Africa was theirs by inherent right, but that the rest of the world was wrong about apartheid. Alex traced Verwoerd's political development with particular attention to his leadership in the secret Broederbond which came to dominate politics, and his flirtation with the Nazis up to their defeat in the War. A concluding chapter showed that Verwoerd's successor, Vorster, was of the same

mould. ' For South Africa's African, Coloured and Indian population, [Verwoerd's] rigid white supremacist beliefs were merely a variation of Fascism, clothed in fine phrases and altruistic pretensions, with the ornaments of a parliamentary democracy.'<sup>26</sup>

He concluded:

*[T]he white oligarchy will remain secure, for the present at least, because of the reluctance of Britain, the United States and other powers to give practical support to action by the UN which might damage their investments in and trade with South Africa. With understandable realism the Nationalist leaders are using this breathing space to build up the country's military strength in preparation for the final, tragic act of suicidal defiance – the ultimate heritage of Verwoerd.'*<sup>27</sup>

The Nationalists' Publications Board lost no time in banning the book. Japie Basson, an opposition MP, raised the question of the ban in the House of Assembly on 4 June 1969. He said that the book contained opinions no different from those that Alex had expressed while a member of the House, and that it was not the job of the Publications Board to protect the government from criticism of this kind. The Nationalist members who responded admitted that they had not read the book, but the Minister of the Interior sought to justify the ban on the grounds that a book was deemed to be 'undesirable' if it 'brings any section of the inhabitants of the Republic into ridicule or contempt' and 'is harmful to the relations between any sections of the inhabitants.'<sup>28</sup> This book, too, remained banned until the dying days of apartheid.

## IDAF Information Service

The International Defence and Aid Fund (IDAF) was established, under Canon Collins' chairmanship, in June 1964. In February 1967, Alex wrote a confidential memorandum for Canon Collins setting out the urgent need for a specialist unit, devoted to the task of gathering, collating and disseminating information about South Africa to counter the extensive pro-apartheid propaganda being spread by the South African authorities through the SA Foundation. Their massive multi-million pound campaign had been successful in gaining a foothold in religious, social, sporting, commercial and other circles in Britain, on the Continent and in America. The SA Information Department was creating a powerful atmosphere of tolerance towards apartheid. Alex argued that the obvious way to meet this challenge was to establish an efficient anti-apartheid information service.

Alex provided a plan for the service, covering South Africa and the front-line states. The service would compile and maintain records on all aspects of apartheid – economic, social, and political, produce leaflets, bulletins, talking points and occasional pamphlets, prepare fund-raising material and compile a regular newsletter. The estimated costs were a modest £5,000 in the first year. The third annual conference of IDAF, in April 1967, unanimously accepted the plan. What became known as Defa Research was funded by national Defence and Aid committees, mainly the Swedes. Alex and Girlie were appointed as the directors. They established an office in the London suburb of Finchley, whose location was not advertised in order to keep the unit separate from the main IDAF organisation and to avoid hostile attention. With the help of volunteers they produced, from July 1967, a quarterly report in two parts, one on political and social matters the other on economics, as well as a statistical bulletin. These invaluable factual accounts were derived from press reports, parliamentary debates (Helen Suzman MP ensured that Alex received these regularly) and other sources. In addition to reports on political and economic matters, each newsletter included lists of all known detainees and details of ongoing political trials.

At first, there was some criticism of the information service by ES (Enuga) Reddy, Secretary of the UN Special Committee against Apartheid. The UN Trust Fund for South Africa had declined to make a grant to support the setting up of the service, because Reddy had doubts about what the service could do. He wrote to Collins on 19 January 1968, only six months after the service had commenced, complaining that the service was 'out of date'. Reddy apparently expected a newspaper, rather than a compilation or dossier, providing a cumulative record of developments. Reddy was also unhappy that some items 'would offend friends' such as the governments of India and Sweden.

The economic section of the first issue reported that an Indian businessman in Durban had said that he was influencing the Indian Government to resume trade with South Africa, a statement being exploited for propaganda purposes by the South African authorities. There had been two reports telling of increased investment in South Africa by Swedish firms (SKF and Volvo). In a private memorandum to Collins, Alex explained that the function of the service was to provide the facts not to replicate the political work of the UN Special Committee and political groups.<sup>29</sup> The information manual was there to tell the facts, not to put a spin on them.

The political commentaries were to be found in IDAF's special reports, for example on transit camps, the prisons, and the British arms embargo. There were also pamphlets. Alex wrote most of the early ones himself. These ranged from the detailed analysis of labour laws, African trade unions, and the colour bar in industry in *Workers under Apartheid* (1969, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed 1971), to the simple explanations in *Apartheid Quiz* (1972). At his invitation, I wrote a pamphlet (anonymously) on *The Boss Law* (1969, revised 1970) exposing the activities of the Bureau of State Security. Other authors included Hilda Bernstein, Ruth First, and Barbara Rogers.

Having successfully set up and run the information service for five years, Alex and Girlie informed Collins in early 1972 that they 'were feeling the effects of their declining years' and proposed to retire as Directors. Alex was now 67 and had suffered from a heart condition since 1958; he was also noticeably weaker after he had to undergo major surgery in 1970 following a botched minor urological operation. The annual conference of IDAF in May 1972 passed a resolution thanking Alex and Girlie for their 'outstanding work'. Delegates spoke very highly of the information service manual and the pamphlets. They praised the accuracy and objectivity of the material produced. Collins, in a handwritten note, said it had been 'a tremendous pleasure as well as privilege' in having them run Defa Research so effectively. Their work was taken over by Hugh Lewin and Alan Brooks. Alex continued to do some work for the service, in particular an influential pamphlet on *The Press under Apartheid*, published in 1974.

## Last years

Alex and Girlie joined Shirley and me in Cambridge in 1974, and followed us when we moved to Canterbury in 1976. Neither of them could be idle for long and, with Girlie's encouragement and assistance, Alex set about writing a memoir of the South African Labour Party. He was uniquely well placed to do this. Girlie collected all the materials she could find, including Labour Party records they had preserved. The history of the South African Labour Party is a significant episode in the development of working-class politics, and is essential to an understanding of why the idea of democratic socialism was bound to fail so long as it was confined to a white minority. The book filled an important gap in the literature. Alex left the manuscript incomplete. I edited it with Girlie's help. Attempts to interest South African publishers in publishing the work in the repressive period of the 1980s failed. Nor did they think they could find a popular readership in the early 2000s when the post-democracy fashion was for personal memoirs full of gossip about personalities. The typescript was deposited in various libraries (see Note on Sources), and has now been made available by SA History Online ([www.sahistory.org.za](http://www.sahistory.org.za))

They led a quiet life in Cambridge and Canterbury, enjoying their family, their friends, and their gardening. They followed political developments in South Africa and the rest of the world closely, and continued to be active in their local Labour Party and anti-apartheid movement. Alex died in Canterbury on 16 November 1983 aged 79, from heart failure. Girlie survived him by 9 years dying from a sudden heart attack on 24 October 1992, aged 86. Sadly, neither of them lived to see the democratic South Africa which was inaugurated on 27 April 1994. The socialist society of which they dreamed still seems far away. But their courage, dedication to humanity, and vision of a society which will abolish misery and want and ensure that all will work and give their best for the common good<sup>30</sup> remains with us to inspire future generations. A poster on the wall of their house in Canterbury quoted the Chinese proverb:

*'Better to light one small candle than to curse the darkness.'*

# End Notes

## Chapter 1

1. Literally 'boss-ship' or domination.
2. Mandela (1994) 190.
3. Undated letter from Walter Sisulu to Bob Hepple, received 25 May 1964.
4. *Rand Daily Mail*, 15 March 1958.
5. *Sunday Express*, 17 June 1956.
6. Telegram from Alfred Nzo to Girlie Hepple, 21 November 1983.
7. Letter from Phyllis Altman to Girlie Hepple, 18 November 1983.
8. Letter from Trevor Huddleston to Girlie Hepple, 22 November 1983.
9. Everatt (2009).
10. Alexander (1994). Paton also wrote two volumes of autobiography (1980, 1988).
11. Clingman (1998); Meredith (2002); Mitchison (1973).
12. Denniston (1999).
13. Yates and Chester (2006).
14. Letter from Mary Benson to Girlie Hepple, 21 November 1983.
15. Letter from Joan Shall to Girlie Hepple, 28 November 1983.
16. *Natal Mercury*, 25 June 1951.
17. Cited by Gossett (1963) 198.
18. Hepple (1984) ch 4.
19. Hobsbawm (1964) 272.
20. Andrews (1941) 36.
21. *Natal Mercury*, 3 January 1951.

## Chapter 2

1. 'South African Labour and the Socialist Objective' *Natal Mercury*, 3 January 1951.
2. Thompson (1955) 828.
3. Shaw (1929) 441.
4. Cited in 'South Africa and the Socialist Objective' *Natal Mercury*, 3 January 1951.
5. Tressell (1951) 331.
6. 'They were the enemy- those ragged-trousered philanthropists who not only quietly submitted like so many cattle to their miserable slavery for the benefit of

others, but defended it, and opposed and ridiculed any suggestion of reform': Tressell (1951) 33.

7. Webb (1935) 970.
8. Mandela (1994) 164.
9. Although modern feminists might think that 'Girlie' is a degrading nickname, she willingly accepted it, explaining, in a note she wrote in 1977: 'They call me Girlie, but my real name is Josephine. When I was ever so young my mother had my black curly hair cut short and when I came back from the hairdresser my father teased me and called me Harry, to which I indignantly replied: "No, I/se Girlie!". Ever since then friends and family have called me by that name. Only at school was I known as Josephine or Josie – and also teased by older girls about the name Joseph.'
10. A term that has been applied to the philosopher Spinoza who was expelled from the Sephardic community in Amsterdam in the 17th century for denying that the Jews are the 'chosen' people.
11. Schama (1987) 596.
12. *Labour Bulletin*, May 1945.
13. *Natal Mercury*, 25 June 1951.
14. *Forward*, 9 January 1948.
15. Cited by Hepple (1984) 62.
16. Roux (1944) 28.
17. Cited from *The International* by Hepple (1984) 62; Roux (1944) 29 ascribes this quotation to David Ivon Jones in a paper on 'Parting of the Ways'. Jones, secretary of the Labour Party, was another who split with the leadership over the war issue.
18. Cope (c1944) 125; and see Andrews (1941).
19. The RMS Lusitania, a cruise liner owned by the Cunard Line, was sunk by a German U-Boat with the loss of 1198 lives.
20. Hepple (1984) 60.
21. Hepple (1984) 234
22. Typscript, 13 October 1947. The article, a response to articles in *Forward*, the Labour newspaper, is in typescript and there is no indication whether it was ever published. Alex spoke to similar effect in House of Assembly Debates, 30 May 1951, col 8085,

when opposing the Suppression of Communism (Amendment) Bill.

23. Ibid.

24. There are different insider accounts of the divisions in the CPSA: compare Simons (1983) 386-415 with Roux (1944) 85-100, 121-4, and Roux and Roux (1972) 143-66.

On the disastrous effects of Comintern policy on the German KPD see Hobsbawm (2002) 68.

25. *Natal Mercury*, 3 January 1951

### Chapter 3

1. Hepple (1984) 6.

2. Hepple (1984) 329.

3. Ibid.

4. Hepple (1984) 273-5.

5. Symposium on Racial policies of South Africa's Main political parties, *Race Relations Journal*, vol. XXVII, No 4, Oct-Dec 1960 (unsigned article by Alex Hepple) 142-4.

6. Annual Message to Congress, 6 January 1941.

7. Hepple (1984) 234

8. Sellars (2002) 7.

9. 'Labour must back the United Nations' *The Democrat*, February 1948, 17.

### Chapter 4

1. Hepple (1954), Hepple (1956), Hepple (1957).

2. House of Assembly Debates, 18/19 April 1951, cols. 5023-6 (referring to the apprehension expressed in the British House of Commons in 1909 by the Labour leader Keir Hardie, which proved to be well-founded, that the Act of Union would lead to the disenfranchisement of Black and Coloured voters).

3. House of Assembly Debates, 27 April 1951, cols 5645-7.

4. Hepple (1966) 128.

5. 'Drift from Democracy', *Natal Mercury*, 25 June 1951; 'Intimidation and Terror in the Land', *Forward*, 30 May 1952; 'Drift from Democracy becoming Headlong Rush to Fascism' *Natal Mercury*, 11 July 1952; 'Our disappearing civil liberties', *Forward*, 17 October 1952.

6. *Natal Mercury*, 11 July 1952.

7. House of Assembly Debates, 16 April 1956, cols 3649-50.

8. *Sunday Times*, 22 April 1956. The Chairman of the

House of Assembly Committee on the Bill refused to put the motion to the vote on the grounds that it extended the coverage of the Bill to a class of employees not contemplated at second reading.

9. House of Assembly Debates, 17 and 19 May 1954, cols.5, 80-91, and 307-48.

10. *Cape Times*, 19 May 1954.

11. House of Assembly Debates, 18 April 1956, cols 3858-63.

12. House of Assembly Debates, 8 February 1957, cols 811-21.

13. House of Assembly Debates, 6 February 1957, col 712 (Arthur Barlow).

14. *ibid*, cols 716-711.

15. House of Assembly Debates, 28 February 1957, col 1922.

16. *Ibid*, cols 1922-32.

17. House of Assembly Debates, 25 May 1954, cols 5634-8.

18. House of Assembly Debates, 14 June 1954, col 568; Hepple (1984) 420.

19. House of Assembly Debates, 27 February 1952, cols 1916-23.

20. *Ibid*, cols 1923-28.

21. Letter from Girlie Hepple to Bob Hepple, 28 February 1952.

22. *Cape Times*, 19 May 1954.

23. *Evening Post*, 25 February 1956.

24. *Rand Daily Mail*, 14 February 1955.

25. *Rand Daily Mail*, 15 March 1958.

26. *Sunday Express*, 17 June 1956.

27. Hepple (1984) 424.

28. Hepple (1984) 428.

29. Hepple (1984) 433.

30. *The Star*, 18 March 1958.

31. Hepple (1984) 437.

32. Hepple (1984) 449.

33. *Contact*, 3 May 1958.

34. Hepple (1984) 446.

### Chapter 5

1. Hepple (1957) 8. This was first published in Southern Sotho in *Workers' Unity*, the SACTU newspaper.

2. Hepple (1966) 225.
3. Hepple (1954)
4. Hepple (1984) 237.
5. Hepple (1984) 348.
6. Hepple (1971) 5.
7. *Forward*, 28 May 1954 (under the pseudonym 'Socialist').
8. Interview with Carter and Johns, 28 February 1964, DISA/Aluka Archive Topic #225.
9. This was later called the Trade Union Council of South Africa (TUCSA) to avoid confusion with SACTU.
10. Hepple (1966) 243.
11. Forum, February 1955, 24.
12. DISA/Aluka Archive Topic # 225.
13. *ibid.*
14. *Rand Daily Mail*, 16 April 1956.
15. House of Assembly Debates, 10 April 1956, col 3337.
16. Telegram from TC Rutherford to Alex Hepple, 12 April 1956.
17. Letter to TC Rutherford from Alex Hepple, 23 April 1956'
18. Letter from TC Rutherford to Alex Hepple. 4 May 1956.\
19. *Rand Daily Mail*, 18 March 1959.
20. *New Age*, 8 March 1956; and Alex Hepple's notes of speech.
21. *Ibid.*
22. DISA/Aluka Archive Topic #225.
23. There was much confusion about whether SACTU was actually affiliated to the WFTU. Although a motion had been passed at an executive committee meeting in June 1955 to do so, SACTU in fact followed the policy of the All-Africa Trade Union Federation (AATUF) to adopt a neutralist position, so they could seek assistance from both the ICFTU and WFTU (DISA/Aluka Archive Topic #225). Luckhardt and Wall (1980) 378 state that 'for reasons of political security', the WFTU never regarded SACTU as an official affiliate, and SACTU paid no affiliation fees. I was sent by SACTU in December 1959 to have confidential discussions with the WFTU in Prague and the AATUF in Accra, and can confirm that this is correct.

24. Luckhardt and Wall (1980) 380.
25. DISA/Aluka Archive #225\
26. *Ibid.*
27. Du Toit (1978) 108-9.
28. Luckhardt and Wall (1980) 412-13.

## Chapter 6

1. *Rand Daily Mail*, 28 September 1955.
2. House of Assembly Debates, 21 January 1957, col 101.
3. Letter from Deputy State Attorney to Alex Hepple, 22 May 1957; *Rand Daily Mail*, 21 January 1957.
4. Letter from Coleman Greenfield & Co to Deputy State Attorney, 16 July 1957; *Rand Daily Mail*, 20 July 1957.
5. Letter from George Woodcock, General Secretary TUC, to Alex Hepple, 5 April 1966; Letter from PH de Jonge, ICFTU, to Alex Hepple, 15 April 1966.
6. Herbstein (2004).
7. Notes prepared by Alex Hepple for Reeves' biographer, John S Peart-Binns, 15 January 1970.
8. *Saamtrek*, 19 September 1952.
9. Letter from B Sachs to D Couzyn, 12 January 1953.
10. Letter from D Couzyn to Alex Hepple, 8 March 1954.
11. *New Age*, 25 November 1954
12. Letter from Alex Hepple to Chairman Editorial Board, *Forward*, 29 September 1953.
13. Letter from Edgar Bernstein to Alex Hepple, 12 March 1954.
14. Letter from Alex Hepple to Edgar Bernstein ,16 March 1954.
15. Letter from Hugo Schilsky to Alex Hepple, 1 February 1956 and from Edgar Bernstein to Alex Hepple, 29 February 1956.
16. *Forward*, 4 May 1956.
17. The left-wing *Guardian* was banned from 23 May 1952, and in order to continue publication changed its name to *Clarion*, then *Peoples' Voice* (May 1952), *Advance* (Oct 1952-Oct 1954), and finally *New Age* (Oct 1954 to Nov 1962).
18. Hepple (1960) 77. This was updated in Hepple (1974).
19. See B Hepple (2004) for a full account.
20. Hepple (1966) ix.

21. *The Economist*, 27 August 1966.
22. *The Statist*, 2 December 1966.
23. *American Historical Review*, 1967, no.4, p.1051.
24. *The Times Literary Supplement*, 12 January 1967.
25. Hepple (1967) 10.
26. Hepple (1967) 238.
27. Hepple (1967) 245-6.
28. House of Assembly Debates, 4 June 1969, cols7219-50.
29. Memorandum by Alex Hepple to Canon Collins, 5 February 1968.
30. 'South Africa and the Socialist Objective' *Natal Mercury* 3 January 1951.

## Note on sources

In writing this memoir I have drawn on many sources including the following:

1 Personal correspondence of Alex and Girlie Hepple, and materials collected by them in researching the history of the SALP and trade unions, and their files on the Treason Trial Defence Fund, SA Defence and Aid Fund and IDAF. Many of these are held in the *Alexander Hepple Collection* in the Royal Commonwealth Society Library, University of Cambridge (RCS/RCMS 199)( <http://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/deptserv/rcs>). The *Mayibuye/Robben Island Archive* at the University of the Western Cape has a large collection of IDAF papers, only some of which are catalogued ([www.mayibuyearchives.org](http://www.mayibuyearchives.org))

2 *Saamtrek* (South African labour newspaper) vol 1, no 1 1952 to Vol II, no 104, 1954 (RCS.Per.2225)

3 *Forward* (Labour newspaper) New Series vol 1 no 1,1962 to vol 3 no 5, 1964 (RCS.per.1048).

4 DISA/Aluka Archive (Digital Innovation in South Africa, University of KwaZulu Natal /Aluka Initiative of Inthaka Harbors Inc) Topic # 225 Trade Unions and Resistance-Labour Struggles in the 1950.

5 Collected articles, 3 vols, and Parliamentary speeches, 4 vols, by Alex Hepple. These will be deposited in the *Alexander Hepple Collection* (above). A full list of these articles and speeches can be found in Alex Hepple, *The South African Labour Party: a memoir*, Apendix III ([www.sahistory.org.za](http://www.sahistory.org.za)).

6 Published pamphlets and books by Alex Hepple ( see References, below)

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## Abbreviations

ANC	African National Congress
ASE	Amalgamated Society of Engineers
BOSS	Bureau of State Security
BWBB	Blankewerkersbeskermingsbond (White workers' protection society)
CPS	Civilian Protection Service
CPSA	Communist Party of South Africa
FOFATUSA	Federation of Free African Trade Unions of South Africa
ICFTU	International Confederation of Free Trade Unions
IDAF	International Defence and Aid Fund
ILO	International Labour Organisation
KPD	Communist Party of Germany
MK	Umkhonto we Sizwe
PAC	Pan-Africanist Congress
SACOD	South African Congress of Democrats
SACPO	South African Coloured Peoples Organisation
SACP	South African Communist Party
SACTU	South African Congress of Trade Unions
SALP	South African Labour Party
SATLC	South African Trades and Labour Council
SATUC	South African Trade Union Council
TUC	Trades Union Congress
WFTU	World Federation of Trade Unions

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