

1986 one evening at Tremlett Grove, London

Visit by Maurice GOLDING, representative of the Mine Union Workers to talk with James MADHLOPE PHILLIPS:

J: In the first place I was the chairman of the **No 2 Branch of the Garment Workers Union**. I was working in the clothing industry. I also became the treasurer, and some years later the president of the **Transvaal Council of Non-European Trade Unions**, as indeed I was also a founder along with my colleagues such as **J.B. Marks, David Kossane, Moses Kotane and Makabene**, who was one of the African pioneers in the trade union movement. So along with these individuals and a few others we founded the CNETU.

The set up, as I would like to point out, in the **Garment Workers Union**, as indeed with the trade unions in South Africa is that, we had as I said, the No.2 branch of the GWU, which consisted of Coloured and Indian members, the No.1 branch consisted of Whites. Some years later during the war, a large number of African women came into the industry, this on account of the fact that Whites were going into the war machinery and so they had to replace this labour and so you found that there was then this influx, if I may call it so, of Black labour into the clothing industry. So that eventually we even incorporated the African female workers who came into the industry into the No.2 branch of the GWU. So that we still remained two sections.

Of course in later history you will find that they were segmented again, but this is another story. What I am trying to show is that segregation which in modern terms is Apartheid, was practiced then and far back in the history of the trade union movement, as in fact it was practised in every aspect of our social, political and economic life. So, I then found myself working in an industry where we had Whites working alongside us, but we realized, as Black workers, that something more had to be done specifically for Black workers, because of the very fact that in the trade union movement you found that there are White Trade Unions as such who enforced the issue of being separate on to Black workers.

The result was of course that in every aspect of our trade union life we had to establish some sort of organisation which would organise Black workers demanding improvement in their wages, in their living conditions and so forth, and we found that this became specifically a task which had to be undertaken by the CNETU and its affiliated trade union organisations.

We were then faced with a struggle virtually on two fronts, against the government and the employers, in collusion with the employees, and also against certain, shall I say, mainly White trade union leaders, who were of the opinion and had always maintained that White workers must not encourage Black workers to become members of their trade union or their organisations which had the cream of all the jobs, all the skilled work, the highest wages, the best facilities in any industry.

THE MINING INDUSTRY & THE MINE WORKERS STRIKE 1946

Now in the mining industry this was clearly even more so, because here we found that there were at the time some 30 000-40 000 white workers, white artisans, we call it, with something like 350 000 to 400 000 Black workers, - I wont give you the figures as such -what

number came as migratory workers (we can work that out at a later stage) I'd say that almost 2/3 of that were migratory workers who came from beyond the borders of South Africa, from places such as was then known as Nyassaland, Northern Rhodesia, Southern Rhodesia, Portuguese East Africa, I am using that because I think we know where we stand, and of course there is Bechuanaland, and Basutoland, and Swaziland.

In past years some attempts were made to organize Black workers, in the mining industry, but these always ended up as failures, because whatever attempts were made by them was always suppressed by the governments in power such as the one by Smuts, or Hertzog, and of course in collusion with the Chamber of Mines. The wage and the condition of labour in contrast to that of the Whites was so wide that you could say that the comparison was that the White worker became partly responsible for the employment of Black workers as their slave fellow workers, if I may put it that way. I suppose "fellow worker" is not even the term to use, they creamed off everything for themselves. I can recall that the wages of White workers in comparison to Black workers must have been something like 20 to 1. One must also bear in mind that these people were enrolled by the **Witwatersrand Labour Recruiting Company** (I can't remember the exact name, we can work that out)

MG: **WENELA**

J: yes, **WENELA**, and this was done all over South Africa and Southern Africa, in fact.

So that these workers were brought in their hundreds to Johannesburg and the Reef, and then were placed in huge compounds which could house up to 6-7000 workers. They lived in these compounds which had dormitories, which could take anything up to forty or fifty in a room, and they slept on cement bunks, with some form of covering over them and some blankets. The conditions were absolutely horrible in so far as I can remember. I'd seen these as a boy when I used to go with an uncle of mine who was a sort of a hawker, and he'd sell things to the workers and at that time they even did part of their cooking in these rooms, because if they were given food, I should say it was not even sufficient for what they needed, because I mean the hard work they did underground, so that they always had to supplement their food by cooking in their rooms and of course things were always in a terrible mess. The cleaning facilities, the water facilities, were absolutely out of this world.

Then during the war I think, it was then thought that a much more determined effort should be made to organize the African mine workers. This task was undertaken by **J.B. Marks** who became president and **James Majoro** who became the general secretary of the union, and a number of individuals whose names I cannot recall. And they went along in the Reef, and in a clandestine way to approach people in the mines and get them to understand what benefits there would be for them if they were organized in a trade union. There was not much they needed to convince them, they realized this, the only thing which did sometimes prevent them from reaching the African mine workers was the ever presence of spies, special police or the police itself. So you can understand the difficulties that we met up with here in organising the workers.

In spite of that they went on over a period, and when they'd thought they had had at least some membership upon which they could base putting forward a claim they then had meetings called in Johannesburg itself in little halls where they spoke to shop stewards who

were appointed by workers of the mines and enlighten them more about conditions and the fact that there were other workers besides themselves. Because you know, the mines extend from Randfontain to Krugersdorp over miles and miles, and miles, they just run along over what is called the "Gold Reef".

Then demands were put forward on the **Chamber of Mines** to consider an increase in the wage, a betterment of their conditions, and other related factors, which I think, I'll give to you when I sort out my documents, so you can put that as something that I should supplement at the next meeting we have.

Well, at the outset the approach was made to the **Chamber of Mines** not to individual employers as such. At no stage were they ever given any encouragement to press forward their requests. In fact even greater efforts were being made by the official police to sort of prevent the mine workers from getting into the compound. There was a War Measure in operation 1425 which I think made it then even more difficult for meetings of any kind to take place. I can't say when this was initiated, but it was definitely, since it was a war measure, during this period.

Although it was something that was brought about during the war it operated even after the war, because as you will realize this was in 1946. So these emergency measures which were operative during the war were still operated in so far as the Blacks were concerned in peace time.

Then a large meeting was called at Johannesburg Market Square, in which something like representatives of all the mines were present, or shall I say a large number of the mines, shop stewards and workers. I can't recall exactly what the number was but there again I might be able to look into it again, ... but it was well over 1500 I'd say, insofar as, you can understand, the situation in the mines was concerned, it must have been problems and difficulties that the mine workers had to face.

In the compounds they were virtually in a prison, to go beyond a compound required special permission, and that was not something that came easily. So you can understand that in these compounds they were in a prison, and were more or less to remain there for the period during which they were contracted to work on the mines. The decision taken at that meeting was that they would give a date for the **Chamber of Mines** to consider the demands they had made, and if those demands were not met with, or considered then the mine workers would have no alternative but to call on the **Mine Workers Union**. And the **MWU** would have no alternative but to call for a strike in the industry. As usual the mine workers didn't even have a reply. They were just ignored. Further letters were sent forward, and I think, the government even encouraged the employers, who of course were the **Chamber of Mines**, not even to bother about recognizing any of the demands that were put forward by the miners.

So that the decision was then taken, that there was to be a general strike. And if I can remember, it happened on the 12th August 1946, I think, (we can verify that).

Well, it came as a shock to many, many people, especially on the **Chamber of Mines** and the government, and the media, when the next day following the declaration of the strike of the mining industry we found that almost from the first day there was virtually a complete shut down in several of the mines.

Contact of course was completely cut off. We couldn't make contact with the miners. Virtually every mine now became sort of enclosed by the police. There was hardly any way of knowing what was going on. On the second day the situation even became more serious, because more mines followed.

I think one can get a pretty good picture when one looks at the stock exchange reports of that period. And you'll see how it reacted. The (I can't quite say what day) the action was taken by the police, when there was a lot of provocation, workers were been beaten up and forced into the mines. - You get very good accounts of this in the **Rand Daily Mail** or the **Star** of that period - as in fact you will also get from the **Guardian**-

MG: That was your own..

J: Yes, that was a paper controlled by us, and it was on the third day, I think on the Wednesday - I think the strike was started on a Monday - I was then phoned by the general secretary to say that virtually the entire leadership of the **Mine Workers Union** had been arrested. That was **J.B. Marks, James Majoro**, and the entire executive committee of the **MWU**, in fact **J.B. Marks** was also the president of the **Council of Non-European Trade Unions** at the time.

I was then called upon to take over the chairmanship of an appointed strike committee, because when the affiliates of the **Council of Non-European Trade Unions** met, they were shocked by the news of what had happened at the mines. We had heard that already nine were shot dead, and that some hundreds were injured. After considering the matter for some hours a decision was taken that a general strike should be declared throughout the Transvaal, insofar as our affiliated members were concerned in support of the **African Mine Workers Union**. I was as I said, appointed chairman of that strike committee.

Things happened very rapidly, because you can understand that this started perhaps on a Monday and by Friday you could say the whole matter had just blown over, so that the force and the terror methods used by the police were such that by Thursday or Friday we had decided that because of the viciousness of the injuries and the deaths sustained by the members of the **Mine Workers Union** that we should call it a day.

We then leafleted the entire Johannesburg by sending out people with leaflets and so on calling them to come to the Market Square, so that we could give a report to them. This was to be on a Thursday, I think, - things are a bit mixed up -

Workers came from all directions, workers came from a certain place called Langlaagte, there was a tobacco factory, there were some militant members were in the **Tobacco Workers Union**, and they decided to walk from Langlaagte,- this is a few miles,- to come and represent themselves at this meeting, and before they had walked more than a mile, they were confronted by the police and they were beaten up, - most of them were women- , and one of the women was pregnant and even lost her baby as a result.

It was then thought that we should go down to the Market Square and then a report reached us at the office that the entire Market Square was surrounded by police.

I was sent along with **Makabeni** to go along to Market Square and we addressed the meeting of course, but when we got there we were immediately confronted by **Colonel Mickdal**, if I can remember the name correctly, he came up to me and to **Gana Makabeni** and he said he was giving us five minutes to disperse and if we did not do this, and I mean, you could see

the entire Market Square a few acres was totally surrounded by white and black police men, black police men with spears and knobkerries and sjamboks and white police with arms, guns and so on.

We realized the seriousness of the situation there and then. There were already a few hundred people surrounded by the police in the square and we realized that it just needed a slight bit of provocation and it would spark immediately action by the police to fire on the crowd.

We then instructed some of our people who were with us to go immediately into the crowd and tell them to disperse, I mean, what else could we do. That of course resulted in our not being able to muster any forces to bring about a general strike. Things were terribly haphazard, I mean this was a new experience for many of us, and we then decided to go back to our respective offices and look over the matter.

A point that I forgot to mention was: during the period when we were considering what action we were going to take, prior to the general strike, we were meeting, and there were certain sources from the employers and from the Johannesburg Municipal Council who were rather anxious about what was going on. And in fact, there was a hell of a fear that they thought we might succeed in our calling this general strike, and the reaction was that they asked that a deputation from the Johannesburg City Council should come to meet us. A very unusual thing, because for the officials to come down to us, I mean, this was something, that does not happen, insofar as we are concerned. It was always we, we had to make up delegations to meet the White Man Boss.

I think, now in this case the White Man Boss came down to meet us. And among the crowd was **Jessie MacPherson**, who was the mayor of Johannesburg, or was to become the mayor of Johannesburg, **Ben Weinbren**, a veteran trade unionist, who was a member of the **Labour Party**, white Labour Party of course, of South Africa, **E.P. Robinson**, who is now "Sir", and the name Robinson should strike a bell, because one of the mines... [*tape bad*] .. he was on this deputation as well, as indeed there were others whose name I cannot remember.

It was very strange that we should have a gathering like this to come and see us. **E.P. Robinson** made an appeal to us, I can't remember verbatim, what he had said, but it was simply that we must have the good sense to realize that the action that we were taking was something which would have dire consequences for those people we are calling on to strike. In fact they were asking us, that if indeed we were thinking of a strike, then that the central services should not be called, that was somewhat what they were saying.

Ben Weinbren, who as I was saying, was a veteran trade unionist, was also a member of the **South African Trades and Labour Council** of the National Executive Committee.

Now here again the **South African Trades and Labour Council** was cabled by the **World Federation of Trade Unions** to ask them, what they thought the strike was about, because then already the action had been taken by the police against, you know, the violence by the police against the mine workers.

The **Trades and Labour Council**, of whom **Ben Weinbren** was a member of the executive, cabled the **World Federation of Trade Unions**, - and this is quoted I think in **Mary Benson's** book as well, as you will find it in "Class & Colour" - that whatever action the police took, it was justified. Now for this to come from a trade union body, I mean, it speaks for itself.

So here we have this deputation meeting with us, then **Weinbren** got up, - he has had a history of helping to organize black workers at some time in the trade union history, - he got up there in a very flamboyant way, he said: 'Look I come here as a friend and as a comrade, and I implore you, not to take the action, that you are about to take. We in the **Trades and Labour Council** do everything in our power to see that you get things sorted out but'all this bla, bla, bla. I put a question to him then, I said that: 'If, as you say, that this is what you are going to do, can you tell us exactly how it comes about that the **Trades and Labour Council** has sent a cable to the **World Federation of Trade Unions** saying that the action taken by the police is absolutely justified?'. This stunned him so completely that he had absolutely no answer.

We then told them that we would consider the request, and we would let them know. But, as you can see, what was subsequently happening was the action taken by police, everything was in disarray, and our ranks were also in disarray in some respects. Then there was a mass arrest of everyone, including myself. They virtually decapitated the leadership of the trade union movement by just taking everyone into prison, over a short period. But the whole idea was quite clear, that once they had got them in and they lay the charges they would neutralize us.

Now this is clearly, more or less the story about this period, but if you see the reaction from **Smuts**, he also said that 'a few bloody heads didn't matter'. The papers reported the action of the police with glee. I can't recall any white trade unionist as such coming out in support of us.

I think this is about as far as I can go there. I can do a bit of filing up at some stage later.

When I was in the GDR some time ago I was asked to visit one of the concentration camps, Sachsenhausen, and on our way back I was interviewed by a correspondent and asked to give an account of what I thought of this, & did I think any of this related to South Africa.

Now, well of course on the mines you don't burn people, like they did there, they shoved them into ovens, they have evidence of all this that took place there. It's an awful looking place, it still has that aura of death about it.

But it did make me think of the mines, of people living away from home, encamped. Now conditions they work under were such that after a year or so on the mines, they developed pneumoconiosis. At the time hardly anything, if at all anything was done, to help them in these diseases which in fact they contracted within the mines. Immediately they contracted it, I believe, they got something like a golden handshake of £40 and were sent back to ...

MG: to disappear.

J: to disappear

Now thousands, I mean if this has been going on since 188.. something, 1884, and considering the hundreds of thousands of people who have been working under these conditions, these primitive conditions...

I think if an estimate is made one day, it can easily be seen that some tens of thousands of people have been virtually annihilated. And so I contrasted this with what happened, but over a longer period. And this is so evident about the life of the average black person in South Africa, that he stands no chance anyway in every respect be they on the mines, be they on the farms, there again they just disappear, I mean it is virtually slave labour, where workers can just be beaten to death and just buried and forgotten about. No statistics, no death certificate, or anything like that, no identification, nothing.

MG It's heartbreaking

J: This is the picture one can show of the situation there. I mean, I lived in it up to the age of 34, I came over in 1954. And I mean from my own experiences which I always related to that of those who were oppressed like myself, and when I think back on the situation in which I am now, and the situation that I could have been in had I been still living in South Africa, the disparity is so great, that realizing that there are many, many difficulties here living in this country, but compared to that, I am living in heaven.

I mean, I realize how frustrated I was, when I was frustrated in South Africa, when I found that I as an individual was held back simply because of the colour of my skin. And in the South African sense I am not black, but being half black. I felt that pinch of being what you know in South African terms being called a "Coloured".

MG: It is a cruel society

J: And I have seen police raids, I've seen people picked up for passes,- something that you just can't imagine, in loads and loads. I mean, we have a song '**Nants' i Pick-up Van**'. There is the Pick-Up-Van coming to pick you up, and you sing it in a very humorous fashion, and how the police just immediately come around the corner and there we are, they just gather them up, throw them into the vans, off they go, charge them, and if they have no passes they send them off to farm labour. And some people would just disappear into farm labour, and I think one can read accounts of this in a book by **Anthony Sampson**, who is living here now, in his book "**Drum**", where he, and - was it **Ruth First**-, who made investigations of what workers experienced in farms and so forth and in the mines, because I think, although your work will involve the mine workers as such, you will find that basically...

MG: it's the same story, wherever you turn. Did **Ruth First** work for this paper "The Guardian"

J: Yes,

MG: Was she one of the early..

J: Yes, that's right. In fact she went very deeply into this question of migrant labour, and forced labour as such, because that is what it was in the belt of farms around the Transvaal where they were and people worked on the potato farms, and were virtually whipped and worked.

MG: It is probably a good deal better now, but it must have been really appalling

J: I don't know if it is

MG: A little bit better, people have got some organisation, but when you haven't got that it would be appalling.

J: Yes and no, I mean conditions have changed to the extent where,- the system has grown, the man who relies on profits and making more profits, realizes he has just about depleted whatever there is among the white working class, so in order to increase his profits he must get more from the Blacks, and so we found there were little avenues open, and there were jobs only for Whites. I can remember when the bakers used to have their vans running around Johannesburg and they were saying "This bread has only been touched by white hands."

MG: What a story that is.

J: You see. There are the details of certain aspects of the life of our people which I think sometimes is missed when one writes something in a very, very statistical way. You understand what I mean. I don't think that anyone so far has given that kind of account. This is what I am going to attempt to do, when I write my story. Because I think a lot of people have tended- you might get the book by **Ezekiel Mphahlele "Down Second Avenue"** it is giving more account of what life is, and was like in the sixties.

MG: Is that set in Johannesburg?

J: Yes.

[Some remarks about Andrea, and digging out the Fair House by Jack Cope]

MG: How many people you think were killed on the mines?

J: It is impossible to tell, because whatever happens, Black life in South Africa, in terms of the official approach is nothing, it's not an event anyhow.

MG: Let's say you've got a situation on your mine, e.g. **Rands Nigel Mines**, and you are the guys who actually run and own the mine, or you manage it, and there is a stay down strike and the police come round and they are sent down the shaft and they chase people and batter them back up out of the mine, and they shoot some people, and it seems a figure of six appears to be quite commonly quoted, doubtless it will get something in one of the newspapers even in the white newspapers, but you 'ld think that if they've got in these people would they have had little passports for working on the mines through MANELA, or would MANELA know how many have been killed this instance, or would you just try desperately I suppose to get an estimate of how many were killed. Or they wouldn't bother about it too much, they 'ld just...

What would they do with the bodies?

J: Oh, they'd dispose of that. You see people don't understand that in South Africa, a black man is..., there are millions born, who have never been registered as such. It is not compulsory. For a black man to disappear, and there are thousands, it's nothing. (I mean from time to time you find a story coming up of a farmer who is charged with murder, and then they found that there were so many graves on his farm, so many bodies were discovered,

but then the whole thing is just closed up.

In my life I have seen two things happen: I have seen a man shot, because he is reaching for his pass book, and the police man shot him. And when he gave evidence he said, he was aggressive anyway reaching for his knife. He died with his pass book in his hand.

MG: Where did you see that?

J: It was in Johannesburg, and strangely enough near the magistrate's court.

MG: The source of "Law and order"?!

J: and another incidence, when I was a little boy, when I saw a policeman who was running after a black man, and as he was running after him, he had this wooden truncheon, hitting at him. And the force he was hitting this man with was such that it eventually broke. And he hit again and it had split, and it was so sharp, and when he hit again it went in and right through the man's neck, and the man immediately must have reacted to this, and he tied his hand at his back with a handcuff and he came out of this yard and he saw a cold storage van, ice blocs etc, this was 1931 or so, and he said come on, take this man to the hospital. I don't know what happened to that man, but I don't think he lived, not with that stick right through his neck. I saw it go in there and out there.

MG: You should start your book with those two stories.

J: I know of so many of them. I walked with my brother in Johannesburg, many years ago, I was about thirteen or fourteen, and as we were walking, I saw a white man, drunk as .., so drunk he was holding on to a pole and vomiting, and as he was vomiting, with every vomit he was going around the pole and holding on to it, and it was looking very funny,

MG: ha, and it made you laugh.

J: and it made me laugh, and it made my brother laugh, and I'd laugh and we walked on. And then four white chaps came, and someone grabbed me and he said 'What were you laughing at?' And so my brother immediately realized what was on and so he said. 'Oh, come on James, let's go and eat', and he just dragged me along, pulled me along. And these chaps followed and they came up and said 'What were you laughing at?' and BANG there was a fight, and of course I hit back, and of course that was the worst thing I could do, and they all got stuck into me and beat me up good and solid, and then and in my daze, I don't know they didn't seem to have hit my brother, and I don't know why they had picked me as small as I was, and the next thing when I came up to a policeman I said: 'I have a complaint to make' - a big burly Afrikaner - he said: 'Jaa?' and he looked at me and said: 'O.K.' got out his book, and said: 'Can you make a statement?' and I made a statement, and 'Who was the person who hit you?' and I said: 'A white man', and you know, he just let out, BANG! and I was out. How dare I come and complain about a white man. That was the moral of that story. He just put his book back, and whap!, and there I was.

So it is these things, which must be involved with the complete story of what a Black goes through in life. Because then when you relate it to the approach where he has to make his

way through a trade union, through a political organisation, or whatever, there are still these things where he has to come from, his location, or from his SOWETO, to come to a meeting, to be harassed by the police, when he goes back, he has these pass laws, all these things, you know it is...

MG: ja, ja it is one of those fiendish systems, and a fiendish history of exploitation of man by man. Abominable.

Let me ask you a couple of other things.

J: I hope I am not drifting

MG: Not at all, it's fascinating

[Continuation of Interview with Maurice G, after coffee break]

MG: SO you have enjoyed living in Britain.

J: Oh, I had my ups and downs. I came here in 1954, you must know I was forced to. I was banned in 1953, and from that time onwards I was unemployed, and I had to make a living, and one has to eat. And although I was involved in the movement and all that, I had to take decision at some stage, to get out. So I was very fortunate in being with some people who understood my situation, and they could see that in my case there were a lot of things I wanted to do, and that I could not achieve in South Africa. e.g. I am a singer, and I thought I must try and follow that up a little here and get away, so they helped to smuggle me out of the country, and well back in South Africa one always thinks, that coming here, England is all going to be milk and honey, so that when I arrived here, I mean there was virtually, [pause] Well, they organized my coming here and I arrived here with £17 in my pocket and that was the beginning of a very, very difficult life. I had no friends here, except for one or two, who I couldn't see as often as I wished.

I was very lonely. The presence of South Africa movement was still on a very, very small scale. I was one of the veterans of those who had been involved in the battle who came into this country. So I must say the first three or four years of my life were

MG: You were living in London

J: Yes

MG: It is a lonely city, I found it very lonely when I came, very unfriendly on the surface.

J: That's right. And so I had lots of ups and downs. I was depressed. In some cases I thought I should go back, what the hell. I couldn't get proper employment, although I was trained as a cutter in the clothing trade in South Africa, I found that that what I had learned - you must know I had only done by watching my employer, he never told me how to do it,- so that when I came here in terms of what the average worker here experiences, they go through it the proper way, they go to a technical college, etc. So I came here and I said 'I am a cutter', oh my god, I went to factory after factory, they said 'you call yourself a bloody cutter, mate, get out!' Sometimes they said 'f.off'. So this happened so often, it happened for a couple of

years, I was in thirty or forty jobs. Some of my friends began to think there was something wrong with me. In fact something w a s going wrong with me, because as you see, I made attempts to learn something about the trade, and I went to evening classes, but it was all involved with this struggle to get things better. Eventually I settled down. Once I got straightened out I started involving myself again in the work that I had been doing in South Africa, of course in a different way, in the trade unions, and in the ANC, so today I am involved in.. (abrupt end of tape..)

Interview was recorded at the home of James Madhlope Phillips and transcribed by Andrea Siemsen