**Roseinnes Daniel Phahle**

Allison Drew

Born on 21 March 1936, Roseinnes Phahle grew up in Alexandra Township. From 1950 to 1952 he boarded at St Peter’s School (now St. Martin’s) in Rosettenville, Johannesburg, which was run by the Community of the Resurrection, a monastic order then headed in South Africa by Father Trevor Huddleston. Phahle then spent two years at Madibane High School (then Bantu High) before matriculating.

Phahle became a political activist and joined the ANC Youth League in Sophiatown while a high school student. Under the leadership of the ANC’s Robert Resha, he and other students at Madibane High organised the Sunday public meetings at Sophiatown’s Freedom Square against the government’s proposed forced removals of Sophiatown residents. He also arranged meetings with high school students in Johannesburg and Pretoria so that Ahmed Kathrada could inform them about the Youth Congresses then being held periodically in Soviet Bloc countries. In 1953-54 Phahle left the Youth League and joined the Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM), attracted by its Ten Point Programme.

From 1956 to 1959 Phahle studied at University of the Witwatersrand, obtaining a degree in Pure Maths and Applied Maths. In 1957 he was actively involved in sustaining the Alexandra Bus Boycott, canvassing daily street by street to ensure attendance at the frequent mass meetings at Number Three Square, where the boycott leaders informed residents about progress and sought their mandate. The boycott leaders included Dan Mokonyane and Vincent Swart, both of the Movement for Democracy of Content and without whom, Phahle maintains, the boycott would have ended in defeat, as well as the future ANC Secretary-General and Foreign Minister, Alfred Nzo. Phahle resigned from the NEUM in 1957, when it refused to join the committee of all Alexandra organisations that had been formed to give leadership to the boycott spontaneously embarked upon by Alexandra residents.

In 1958, supported by the majority of black students, Phahle was elected to the Wits Students’ Representative Council. Wits University and the predominantly white National Union of South African Students were then calling for and proclaiming ‘Academic Non-Segregation’ in opposition to the government’s attempts to entrench racial segregation ever more deeply into higher education. Phahle argued that segregation at Wits extended far beyond academic life into all areas of student experience, including residences, sports and social life. His election slogan was: ‘Yes to Academic Non-Segregation and No to Non-Academic Segregation.’ During his last two years at Wits, he and others who had left the NEUM and formed the Transvaal Indian and Coloured Teachers Association held regular Saturday discussion and study meetings in Newtown, to which Baruch Hirson, a Marxist Physics lecturer at Wits, was regularly invited to share his historical knowledge of the South African and international left.

In 1960, after completing university, Phahle volunteered to teach Mathematics at the Congress School in Fordsburg, Johannesburg. This had been set up by the Transvaal Indian Congress to protest the government’s closure of Johannesburg Indian High School – part of its Group Areas policy to force Fordsburg’s Indian residents to move to Lenasia. He then began working as an articled clerk for Andrew Lukele, who was then in the Unity Movement, undertaking a three-year Attorneys’ Admission Diploma by distance learning with UNISA.

Phahle became the key contact person in Johannesburg for the National Liberation Front (NLF). After its members, Neville Alexander and ten others, were arrested and imprisoned he fell under continual surveillance and harassment by the security police, known then as the Special Branch. He was served with a letter from the Minister of Internal Affairs withdrawing and ordering him to hand in his travel document. In January 1965 he was forced into exile, initially in Bechuanaland (now Botswana); because he left the country on an exit permit, he did not take the final exam for the law diploma. In December 1965 he moved to London, after arrangements for him to enter the United Kingdom without a passport, thanks to the National Union of Teachers and the help of South African exiles Kenneth Jordaan and Ishmael Mahomed (later an ANC Member of Parliament), who had also been associated with the NLF. Barney Desai, who had contacts with Labour Party MPs, waited at Heathrow Airport in case there were problems with immigration officials. Britain needed Maths teachers, and Phahle’s Maths degree, which helped him obtain an invitation to be interviewed for a teaching job, was his *de facto* passport into the country.

Later, living in London, and shortly after the 1976 Soweto Uprising, Phahle linked up with the black consciousness movement. In 1979-81 he was involved with the formation of the Black Consciousness Movement of Azania (BCMA), which held its inaugural conference in London in April 1980 at which an interim committee was elected. By the time of the inaugural conference, Lingham Moodley had edited three issues of *Solidarity*, which, after the conference, became the BCMA’s official organ. The issues were broadly cultural and did not emphatically convey that black consciousness was not only a black pride movement but was also at the helm of a resurgence of open anti-apartheid resistance inside the country. Following the conference, Phahle, who was co-opted as a member of the BCMA’s interim committee, became *Solidarity*’s editor.

The black consciousness movement emerged at a time when political activity was suppressed, and as a result the ANC showed no discernible presence inside the country. The BCMA sought ‘a unification of liberation movements,’ but ‘found itself cold shouldered.’[[1]](#endnote-1) The ANC and SACP derided and downplayed the BCMA, with some calling it a ‘third force.’ Phahle felt that it was crucial that the external BCMA demonstrate the significance and vitality of black consciousness organisations inside South Africa so that they could attract international support, especially financial support. The journal thus crucially needed a more political line and more news about black consciousness activism inside the country to mobilise international support.

Phahle edited five issues of *Solidarity*, nos. 4 – 8, from October 1980 to the 4th quarter of 1981. He and interim committee member Andrew Lukele were tasked to compile a report of the inaugural conference of the BCMA, namely *Our Urgent Tasks*, published both as a pamphlet and in issue no 4. *Our Urgent Tasks* was a statement of principles and a programme of action that offered supporters a document with which to build international solidarity for black consciousness organisations inside the country.

The issues edited by Phahle contained more reports on political struggles inside the country. Issue no. 4 dealt with the school boycotts in Phahle’s article ‘We don’t want no education’. This attracted the attention of *News and Letters*, the organization of Raya Dunayevskaya and, formerly, CLR James, and of *Ufahamu*, the journal of the University of California, Los Angeles-based African Activist Association. *News and Letters* reprinted parts of the article, and *Ufahamu*, all of it. Issue no. 5 contained a piece on the anti-rent strikes, and no. 6, an article on the Transvaal bus boycotts, which was cited by Tom Lodge in his *Black Politics in South Africa*. Nos. 7 and 8 were general issues. *Solidarity* tried to link with organizations in other parts of the world by reporting about them and expressing solidarity with their struggles. It published an article by Walter Rodney, leader of the Working People’s Alliance of Guyana, and reported on his assassination. It covered the Eritrean struggle for self-determination and wrote about *Solidarnosc* in Poland as a working-class movement struggling to find expression against a repressive regime.

*Solidarity* was distributed to all the African governments. The BCMA hoped to gain support to set up a military wing, and the interim committee went to Nigeria to present *Our Urgent Tasks* to the Nigerian government in a bid for recognition. They returned optimistic about the possibility of getting financial support. However, their optimism was misplaced, as the Nigerian government did not recognize them. The Nigerian episode destabilised the BCMA.

Anticipating recognition and support from Nigeria, according to Phahle, some interim committee members began to position themselves within the organization in order to become the direct recipients of the expected funding. They made unsubstantiated accusations against three other members – including Phahle –claiming that they caucused amongst themselves while attending an interim committee meeting in Germany. They questioned the prominence *Solidarity* was giving to reporting on open struggle activities inside the country, arguing that ‘the people don’t need reports of struggles they are involved in’. This created an atmosphere of intense factional conflict within the BCMA.

As a result of the conflictual climate, Phahle left the BCMA around 1982. He had not joined the BCMA as an adherent of black consciousness philosophy, but rather to identify and express solidarity with a movement that at the time was playing a significant role inside the country but that was internationally beleaguered due to ANC and SACP opposition. He and others formed the Azania Liberation Support Committee (ALSC) and in 1983 launched *Azania Worker* and *Azania Frontline* as publications that were part of the South African liberation movement, but independent of any political organization. As Marxists and socialists, Phahle and his comrades did not shun black consciousness nor find it antithetical to class consciousness – hence their adoption of the name Azania in the publication titles. *Azania Worker* was intended to be a non-sectarian forum in which socialists from all political currents could contribute towards the development of a theory and practice of social change, and in which they could exchange experiences and lessons drawn from past and present struggles. *Azania Frontline: Newsletter of the Azania (South Africa) Liberation Support Committee* published articles written by the committee based on news reports from South Africa and also reprinted news articles from South African newspapers written by black journalists. Phahle and the other members of the ALSC organized solidarity activities for the Metal & Allied Workers Union (MAWU) and the Western Cape regional office of the Electrical & Allied Trades Union (EATUSA). Throughout this period Phahle taught Maths at Lambeth College

In addition to editing the ALSC publications, Phahle contributed many articles to them, some under his own name, some under the pseudonyms Sanza Chocho and Lerato Ngolizwe, and some – such as, ‘Is the left in COSATU chickening out?’ *Azania Frontline*, 19, October 1987 – without attribution. He also contributed reports on the South African trade union movement to *Labour Briefing* and reviewed books on South Africa for *Race & Class*. In 1988 Baruch Hirson launched *Searchlight South Africa: a Marxist journal of South African Studies*, and Phahle served on its editorial board until January 1991 (issues 1 to 6). By 1989 the ALSC publications were having serious financial difficulties, so they were combined into *Frontline Worker*. Political conditions in South Africa were changing, and the last issue appeared in January 1991.

On 1 January 1995 Phahle returned to South Africa. He taught Maths at Vista University, launched the non-profit Dipalo School of Information and Communication Technology in Soweto, collaborated with researchers at the Women’s Development Foundation and acted as a statistical advisor on a project located in the Office of the President.

**Sources**

Roseinnes Daniel Phahle, Affidavit, 29 August 2000.

Interview with Roseinnes Phahle, Johannesburg, 7 July 2018.

1. Thomas G. Karis and Gail M. Gerhart, eds., *From Protest to Challenge: A documentary history of African politics in South Africa*, vol. 5, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University, 1997, p. 342, n 27. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)