

Interview with Ron Todd, former General Secretary of the Transport & General Workers Union and Chair of the TUC International Committee, by Christabel Gurney on 22 March 2004, reproduced on the Anti-Apartheid Movement Archives Committee Forward to Freedom project website <http://www.aamarchives.org/>

Christabel Gurney: Could you start off by saying a bit about the Transport & General Workers Union and apartheid. They affiliated to the Anti-Apartheid Movement – how did it come about that the union became involved in the issue?

Ron Todd: Well, I took over from Moss Evans, and Moss also had been Chairman of the International Committee of the TUC. He had very forcefully indicated through our Executive Council that our union, the Transport & General Workers Union, would give total support in the fight against apartheid, both morally, physically and financially. And so I really took on the mantle when I became General Secretary, and also Chairman of the International Committee [of the TUC], not only fulfilling that obligation, but I had a strong view about the need for bilateral relations. I understood the need for international cooperation and relationships, but I thought that at the sharp end we needed to have bilateral relationships with various unions. We linked with the Transport & General Workers Union of South Africa and a number of other unions. Outside of the TUC we had our own support for them, in providing either money or equipment.

CG: The T&G was affiliated to the Anti-Apartheid Movement. In the '70s union positions varied on sanctions – some of them felt that sanctions would hurt the economy here and be bad for their members. Do you have any memories of discussions around that?

RT: In some of our discussions on the Executive Council there was a thread of opinion that said, 'Aren't we making it worse for the workers?' My argument was that the workers themselves had indicated that they were the sufferers from apartheid and discrimination and so they should be the ones to talk about the solution. I was Chairman of the Malawi Committee when Joan Lestor was President. I was involved with the man who was killed in Harare, Dr Attati Mpakati. Dr Mpakati was an exile from Malawi. I was involved on Zimbabwe. I did a meeting in London, supposed to be with Robert Mugabe and Joshua Nkomo – although they didn't attend the meeting because the Special Branch came into it. So my whole background had been supporting all the efforts in Southern Africa and we just carried on, and when I became General Secretary I had the total support of the Executive Council, to such an extent that the Executive Council supported my call when, on a number of occasions, I said if our government would not impose sanctions against South Africa, the T&G would support any group of workers who took action against apartheid.

CG: When was that?

RT: I made the speech at the Durham Miners Gala – that would be in '85 or '86.

CG: The T&G at national level, and probably at regional level, was very positive. But how far down into the union do you think the interest and the enthusiasm went?

RT: Among the activists we had great support for the union's role in Southern Africa and especially in South Africa. I had been Regional Secretary of London and the Home Counties before I was General Secretary. In London and the Home Counties we had 520,000 members. That was almost as big as the fourth largest union in the country.

CG: You were the biggest union then?

RT: Yes, we were, and so we had massive support at the grass roots. But I used to argue very often – I was criticised for it sometimes – when people said to me 'Why can't you get people to do this?' [*refuse to handle South African goods*] I said 'You can't make a backbone out of a wishbone'. And they were critical. When we went to South Africa [in July 1986] SACTU [South African Congress of Trade Unions] were critical of us. They said we shouldn't go, we shouldn't link up with the ICFTU [International Confederation of Free Trade Unions]. So I made a speech saying instead of talking about the things we can't do, let's talk about the things we can do.

CG: Do you think it would ever have been possible to get grassroots action on a big scale?

RT: For instance, we had the Code of Conduct. I suppose with hindsight people would say it's easy for me to say this now, but I was never enamoured of the Code of Conduct. It was ineffective. And every time we met either Lynda Chalker [Minister of State at the Foreign Office] or Geoffrey Howe [Foreign Secretary], he would wax lyrical about what the British companies were doing. I had great belief in the unions themselves. And as an example, in my own field, I was an officer at Ford's before I was General Secretary. There was a strike in Port Elizabeth, the pickets had been beaten up and some were in hospital. And I met the lads in Fords – I didn't need to meet them, they didn't need me to tell them. We told the Ford Motor Company of our intentions, 'You either talk to your South African partners in Ford in Port Elizabeth and you either tell them to pull back from what they're doing or we will stop all KD [knock-down components] from going from Dagenham to Port Elizabeth, and Ford's said, 'We can't interfere with the South African government'. We said, 'All right then, no KD. We are not sending any packets out to South Africa.' Within a few days we found it had all changed – they were recognising the strikers.

CG: And later, in '86 or '87, they did stop importing pick-up trucks and they stopped exporting stuff too ...

RT: There was tremendous pressure from the Ford workers, from the 24 plants, there was pressure within the company.

CG: To move on to the TUC, before your time at the TUC, when Vic Feather was General Secretary, there was hostility to sanctions and suspicion of the Anti-Apartheid

Movement. But then the policy changed over quite a considerable period, on sanctions, particularly. How did that come about? Do you remember having arguments and discussions about it?

RT: I wasn't involved at a national level during the time of Vic Feather. But I do know the arguments we used to have. We said 'You're taking on the mantle of the CBI.' We said to them 'Sanctions can work'.

CG: Was this on the TUC General Council?

RT: No, it was on the NEC, the National Executive Council, of our union. I know that our union, certainly under Frank Cousins, and then under Jack Jones, was supportive of all that was going on in Africa. The real problem, as I said, was that Mrs Thatcher, in the 1980s, was using the same argument that the TUC had used in the 1970s. She was actually saying exactly what the TUC said in the 1970s.

CG: How did it come about that the TUC changed its policy?

RT: There were a lot of things that subtly influenced it. I remember the Industrial Relations Bill, which has got nothing to do with this, but it's an example of how the TUC can be influenced. Vic Feather and members of the General Council couldn't believe their eyes when they saw the mass demonstration that took place in London, and it carried them along. We all gathered at the Temple. Even Vic Feather said – my God, I didn't realise there was this sort of feeling. The same thing happened when they saw how people felt about what was going on in South Africa.

CG: How important do you think it was that the union movement was growing in South Africa, so that the TUC here could relate to the independent trade union movement?

RT: Once you build up bilateral relations, when the T&G in South Africa knew that they would be supported by the T&G in Britain and we were having exchanges and giving them what help we could, it boosted them up. They started to think – we're not alone. It struck me when I went to South Africa, in one of the union buildings, that they had solidarity walls. They had a wall on which they pinned all the messages from all over the world. You'd be surprised psychologically what it does to someone who thinks they're fighting on their own, and suddenly they see all the things that are going on to support them. And also the work of COSATU – although we had problems between COSATU and NACTU.

CG: Could you say something about that visit, in 1986?

RT: First of all let me tell you this. I don't know if you have heard of Emma Mashinini. Emma had been in prison for six months and then she came to Europe to recuperate. When she knew we were going to South Africa, Emma said to me and Norman Willis 'I can't stay in London when a State of Emergency has been declared. I've got to go back. My people are being arrested.' So we said she should come back with us – we were

going on the delegation. The ICFTU [International Confederation of Free Trade Unions] were having problems getting visas, and I said to Norman that we could go on our own, not necessarily with the ICFTU, because there was a lot of criticism of the ICFTU.

We were talking to Emma in a room – I'll never forget it – and Norman said 'Who will we be meeting?' So I said we'd meet Jay Naidoo [General Secretary of COSATU] and we'll meet Alec Erwin and Piroshaw Camay [General Secretary of CUSA], and Emma went to walk out of the room. I asked her where she was going and she said 'I don't want to hear any names because if they take me in' I thought, my God, they might interrogate her.

But what struck me in South Africa was when we left the suburbs of Johannesburg – you go along the main highway and about 20 kilometres out you leave the highway and go up a dirt track to Alexandra. We had a meeting with Bishop Tutu and he said that we must go to Alexandra, the town he was born in. I couldn't believe what I saw in Alexandra – I wrote about it when I came home. The little things struck me. Norman Willis and I went into a little hovel and there was a man and his wife and four children. The youngest one was crawling about, and when we walked in the other three dived through the window. Their father was shouting to them, 'These white men won't hurt you!' That was when the hippos arrived and then we were arrested. I wasn't bothered about the arrest because we were with Lane Kirkland from the AFL/CIO, Ernst Breit from Germany and John Vanderveken [General Secretary of the ICFTU], but the problem was that while they were holding us the townspeople were gathering. I thought it only needs for one of them to throw a stone and we were in the middle of it.

CG: Do you think that your visit and other visits were useful? Anti-Apartheid, as you know, at that time wasn't keen on people going to South Africa.

RT: I met Mike Terry and Simon Sapper and they wished us well, but they had concerns about it. Incidentally, we had the same problems with COSATU [Confederation of South African Trade Unions]. COSATU didn't want any help from the ICFTU. We met Jay Naidoo – he tried to put it very diplomatically. He had a lot of trouble internally, because they wanted money from national trade union centres but didn't necessarily want the ICFTU to be involved. Zola Zembe of SACTU [South African Congress of Trade Unions] sent me a telegram saying, 'Why are you going?' I met him as well. We said, 'We're not going as fact-finders, there's been enough fact-finding missions. We're going to establish personal links with the leaders and to try to build up more bilateral relationships with the unions concerned.' And I think it did a lot of good.

CG: You did meet Jay Naidoo?

RT: Yes. One of the criticisms was that we'd meet some of the leaders and you'll lay them open to being arrested by the police. We met in the Sun Hotel in Johannesburg – that wasn't our choice, it was Jay Naidoo's. The reason was that the Sun Hotel has got about five different exits.

CG: COSATU thought that the ICFTU had interfered in the unity negotiations and discouraged CUSA unions from joining ...

RT: Jay Naidoo put it diplomatically, but they were concerned – as I was when we were told the ICFTU were finding it difficult to get visas and I said to Norman, ‘Let’s go ahead’. I didn’t particularly want to be in the ICFTU delegation. But when they got their visas they joined us.

CG: After you came back the TUC stepped up its whole campaign. What happened?

RT: When we came back I did a few radio programmes. Brian Redhead of the BBC said that they had a tremendous response, because I was giving an account of what I saw. Bishop Tutu said to me, ‘If I was a black South African I’d have taken a gun and rejected Bishop Tutu’, and you understood that position. The houses we went in – I saw a woman whose son had been taken away and when we met her she was writing to the Minister of the Interior trying to find out where he was. When they questioned her son they took her with them and at about 4 o’clock in the morning they took her to the door and kicked her down the stairs. When we came back we were telling all these stories. I did a full report to the General Council. So moved were they by what we had experienced that they gave 100 per cent support. So we had ‘Beating Apartheid’, we had the Flower for Freedom – everybody got a red carnation at Congress – they put £2 in the box. Norman phoned me because the refrigerated lorry bringing them had gone off the road. They had no carnations. I phoned to my officer at Covent Garden – I said I want every red carnation in Covent Garden ... we got 2,000 carnations.

CG: So you were saying that Norman Willis and your attitude changed after you’d been to South Africa ...

RT: Well, as I was always totally opposed to apartheid, the visit intensified my determination to campaign at every level. But for instance, I met a boy from the Orange Free State. In the Orange Free State it was a crime to wear a T-shirt with a union logo on it. They whipped him with a sjambok and I had the photograph from his neck to his buttocks, but the ironic thing was that I had it under my shirt and when we got to Johannesburg they started to do a search and it started to weigh like a paving stone. And the single men’s hostel that we went to. There were things I saw there – I went round the country afterwards talking to our people and I said ‘I defy any of you to see these things and then not be prepared to go to the wall for it’.

CG: You mentioned Nicaragua – what other international issues did the TUC work on when you were Chair of the International Committee and how did the attention given to South Africa compare?

RT: In the time that I was Chair we had the Nicaraguan problem with the Sandinistas – I went there. But whenever I went anywhere I didn’t just want to meet people who we supported, so in Nicaragua we met Violetta Chamorro who ran the paper, we met people who were opposed to the Sandinistas. But throughout the period when I was Chair, of all the agenda, South Africa must have held 60 per cent, South Africa was uppermost in everybody’s minds. We campaigned when the Commonwealth Heads of Government

met, we were all outside Marlborough House. We met the Commonwealth Heads, we met Bob Hawke, Kenneth Kaunda. When we went to his hotel there were television lights in the reception. I said to Norman, it couldn't be for us – Mrs Thatcher was with him! So she saw us and just walked past. Kenneth Kaunda said 'We talk about the problems of the world and all some people are concerned about is the price of gold and platinum' – he didn't mention her by name.

But there were many misrepresentations, this is *Socialist Worker* [*holds up a copy of Socialist Worker*]. It says 'To declare, as Ron Todd does, that workers should perhaps take an hour off is a cop out.' What I said was, at the Durham Miners Gala, that if the British government would not impose sanctions, then the British trade union movement should indicate that they would, unilaterally. As an example, I said 'If every worker who has witnessed the brutal scenes on television and is sickened by the obscenity of apartheid were stop work for one hour to register their protest against Thatcher's government, that would be a stand of some significance.' So I wasn't saying 'perhaps you should take an hour off'. I was saying 'Let every worker demonstrate what they feel about it'.

CG: So what you're really saying is that you have to be realistic about what you could get people to do ...

RT: That's why I said you can't make a backbone out of a wishbone. We had the same problem in the miners strike, in the Wapping dispute – in the Wapping dispute I expelled 32 members from my union, which was unconstitutional. It was TNT who were carrying the papers. I was saying to all of our people 'If you have a meeting and you decide to tell your employer who's got a subsidiary in South Africa that you're taking action against apartheid, then we'll support you. Even if it means that the government takes us on.' That was unequivocal.

CG: Do you remember the Liverpool dockers in the '70s had a mass meeting that wouldn't go along with blacking South African goods? But later on they did take action on uranium hexafluoride.

RT: Yes, but you couldn't always get people to do it. It's a bit like the nuclear issue. We used to show a film that showed the effects of nuclear weapon. It brings it home. We had to try and do that with our people who didn't always understand what was going on in South Africa.

CG: To go back a bit – the TUC made a big thing about how they were supporting South African unions and bringing people over for training ...

RT: In my own region, Region 1, we were doing the same thing. We were bringing people over.

CG: Was that before you became General Secretary?

RT: It was when I was National Organiser, between 1978 and 1984. My great belief was in bilateral exchanges. Let's have half a dozen of their workers and they can see what's going on in Britain and we can send some of our people over there and come back and talk about what they've seen. The more you do that, the more support you get from people who hear their stories. Apart from our general activities, when Moses Mayekiso was accused of treason, we had Tony Shaw there as an observer and we supported Moses' family. When NUJ [Ken Ashton, NUJ General Secretary] was refused entry, we took it up with Geoffrey Howe. Norman and I met Lynda Chalker on a number of occasions, so things went on behind the scenes. At one time we had a list of 9,000 detainees. There was very little information about them. I didn't like the Code of Conduct, it was all lip service. When the Conservative Government took over they were even worse than Labour, it was all cosmetic.

CG: Do you remember the sports boycott? The TUC was firm on that.

RT: People can be critical of the TUC over the years. But in the time of Len Murray and Norman Willis I don't think anybody can be critical of the effort that the TUC put in on anti-apartheid and their focus on South Africa.

CG: How much was it a left-right issue or how much was it a humanitarian issue?

RT: The right wing and left wing issue wasn't all that prominent on South Africa. When I was Chair of the International Committee, I was Chairman of the Conference Arrangements Committee [of the TUC]. One year we had two motions, one was on COSATU and one on NACTU, so I had to meet them and say we wanted one resolution.

CG: You were involved early on – you spoke at the Anti-Apartheid Movement's fringe meeting at Congress in 1978. Looking back, why did you get involved before apartheid became such a major issue?

RT: I like to think I'm an internationalist. Where there are workers and where they are in struggle, I think we should always be involved. I got in trouble over it. The meeting I did on Zimbabwe – I said British workers should stand up and call for sanctions. I was called in by the General Secretary, someone said Ron Todd is supporting violence in Southern Africa. I said violence had been going on for three decades.

CG: Do you think there was any backlash on the apartheid issue because of racism in Britain?

RT: No, Anti-Apartheid played a major role. Just before we went to South Africa I spoke at Frank Cousins' memorial meeting. After the meeting I spoke to Trevor Huddleston. I also met Terry Waite – it was him who got us the meeting with Tutu. But it was Trevor's idea originally. Then Terry Waite said he would phone him. We also spoke to Denis Healy who had just come back from South Africa. Anti-Apartheid played a major role in bringing together different strands of the movement.