

Interview with John Sheldon, former Joint General Secretary PCS (Public and Civil Service Union), by Christabel Gurney on 28 March 2000, reproduced on the Anti-Apartheid Movement Archives Committee Forward to Freedom project website
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Christabel Gurney: Can you remember when you first became aware of apartheid as an issue and how you got involved?

John Sheldon: Yes I can. I can remember the defining moment. I suppose, like everybody else, it must have been Sharpeville. I can't think of anything else . . . I suspect I became actively involved in 1968. I was a student at Ruskin [Ruskin College, Oxford] and one of my friends was a member of TASS, the draughtsmen's union, whose member, David Kitson, was in prison in South Africa and we thought we would use that issue broadly to combat the effect of Enoch Powell's campaigning in 1968 and 1969. So the issues were double-edged in many ways. It was a campaign against apartheid, but it was a campaign to try to get the trade union movement and academia involved in the anti-Enoch Powell rallies and campaigns. So that was my initial involvement in the movement.

CG: How did you come to be at Ruskin College?

JS: I was a shop steward in the Post Office Engineering Union and won the union scholarship to Ruskin.

CG: Were you in at the beginning of the Ruskin Kitson Committee?

JS: Yes, it was basically a small group of people, two of them members of TASS. You've got to remember it was 1968 and there was lots of other political activity going on at the time. Ruskin was in fact a hive of political activity and we changed the constitution of the Ruskin Students Committee, we got students elected to the governing body and all that sort of activity was going on at the time, an interesting time for people. I volunteered to become the Treasurer of the Kitson Committee and since we had no money, we had to raise some and so I suspect I was on the – what did we call them – we'd call them task groups or working parties now, we called them committees then, but certainly that was the three or four people who were the force behind it. I have to say it was extraordinarily well supported by the student body as a whole and by the college authorities who themselves could see that it was an issue that Ruskin as an institution needed to play a part in.

CG: You said it was a hive of political activity and there were other issues then, like Vietnam. I wonder how at Ruskin the anti-apartheid issue came to the fore.

JS: Vietnam never came into my consciousness like apartheid. I suspect it was because I wasn't a student, I was a worker. They were students' issues in a way. The British trade union movement did not involve itself in the Vietnam demonstrations, like in retrospect I would have thought that it should have. But I think that clearly the issue of race was an issue which – interested isn't the right word – which hit you on the end of the nose. It was an issue which was about class as well, and in the '60s and the early '70s the issue for British trade unionists was the issue of social class. It still is for some of us, but I think that race was a class issue rather than a broader political issue and I think that it was through that perspective that I first became involved. And if I might say so – it's a bit of a long story – but I think it also came

about because I've always been interested in sport. And I'm very interested in Rugby League, which is a working class sport. And it was the fact that the South Africans refused entry to someone called Billy Boston, who played on the wing for Wigan, a very famous rugby league player, a black Welshman, and I think that that was the first illustration that I had about what apartheid must mean. Credit to the British Rugby League, they did not go. And this was well before the Basil D'Oliveira affair.

CG: You mean they were invited to play in South Africa, a national British Rugby League ...

JS: Yes, and they didn't go. So I think that brought it home to me. Billy Boston was a hero to many millions of people in the north of England. For him not to be able to go to South Africa, I think fetched that home to lots of ordinary people, if you like, the guy on the street, that perhaps this was something which was affecting them as well as just affecting some people in far off South Africa – we're talking about 30 odd years ago. So there was lots of things that drew the anti-apartheid cause towards British trade unionism that just maybe Vietnam did not do, to go back to the original question.

CG: So what did you do after you'd formed this committee at Ruskin?

JS: Well, you are asking me to dredge into my memory banks now.

CG: What year was that?

JS: 1968, or it might have been 1969. 1969 I think was the first Ruskin Kitson march – it was either in '69 and '70, or '68 and '69, because we did them both.ⁱ

CG: We can check that. TASS [DATA] already had its Kitson Committee right from '64.ⁱⁱ

JS: It did. And we worked in conjunction with that. Ken Gillⁱⁱⁱ was a keen player in that. The first thing that we did, of course, was to sit down and try to devise some leaflets, which was in retrospect rather more difficult than it is now. And then TASS printed them for us and we distributed the leaflets and asked people to contribute to ... And we had leaflets printed and we also sent out begging letters to all trade unions asking for support and trades councils. And I have in front of me now [*John produced an exercise book with a hand-written list of contributors*] how we got it started, and – this is wonderful – five people contributed £25 each to get the thing started and there they are. John Schild, Jo Syed, Henry Smith, who was a tutor at Ruskin, Eric Smith, whose father was General Secretary of UCATT^{iv} and myself, since I was in employment at the time. And I have a list here of everybody who contributed. Look at that! Guineas, pounds, £2.15s.3d I see here, 10 bob from Greenwich Trades Council, Thurrock Trades Council, a quid – there you go. This is a book that's obviously priceless, isn't it, to me anyway.

CG: Really a lot of small donations.

JS: The whole of the thing is made of contributions of £1 to £10 perhaps. We funded the whole thing from £801 collected from – there must be over a hundred contributions here. And I suspect that therefore there must be an expenditure account somewhere – there we go [*finds expenditure list*] – that's how we spent the money.

CG: So that was the first march?

JS: Well, like everything else, there's not a date anywhere to be seen. It must have been for the first march.

CG: So how many of you were there on the first march? Was it just students from Ruskin?

JS: No. It took four days, we had a public meeting in every town. So we had a public meeting in High Wycombe, which was hardly a hot-bed of ... but nevertheless had the beginnings of an immigrant population. It was there that we first met the National Front in force. They wrecked the meeting, or tried to wreck the meeting, so from then on the police, of course, helped us even more with the march. We stopped in High Wycombe ...

CG: About how many of you were there?

JS: There would have been about a hundred of us on the march.

CG: And were they all young trade unionists?

JS: The vast majority of them were Ruskin students, so the vast majority of people on that march were between 25 and 45 and were trade union shop stewards.

CG: Did you have any connection with union officials over it?

JS: Only the connections that individuals had with districts or their head offices, as the demonstration picked up in its organisation. For example, my old union, the POEU, fed us and laid on medical treatment for us, for our blisters, at its headquarters in Greystoke House, as we marched down the A40. DATA – it was DATA, not TASS – did all the printing and helped us. Two people from the DATA Kitson Committee came and sat on the Ruskin College Kitson Committee so that there was lots of contacts with the official DATA Kitson Committee and I suppose all the other contacts were done through people knowing individuals who were in the Transport and General Workers or what have you. We certainly didn't have contacts at general secretary level, it was basically a shop stewards movement. I suspect people wondered whether the official trade union movement should get too near to what was, basically, a students organisation, apart from the fact that the students were well over 30.

CG: How much was it a demonstration about releasing Dave Kitson and how much was it a wider demonstration about anti-apartheid issues? And were you concerned about the call for an arms embargo and sanctions?

JS: It was basically a demonstration about David Kitson, to release David Kitson, that was clearly its focus. It had a trade union resonance – that's not a word that we used in 1968 by the way, but it certainly ... we were political activists ... it was to alert people to the damage that apartheid was doing, it wasn't just to release Dave Kitson, it was to try to expose the arguments of Enoch Powell. I have to say that the Enoch Powell phenomenon was strong in this country in the '60s and this was our attempt to try to combat that, but also to campaign on a trade union issue. A trade unionist was locked up in South Africa for trying to free South Africa and this seemed to us to be a good campaigning cause and it was very very successful.

CG: At what point did you get involved with the Anti-Apartheid Movement? You must have, because Oliver Tambo and Trevor Huddleston were on the platform.

JS: We sought meetings with the Anti-Apartheid Movement. They provided us with information, they provided us with ideas for leaflets, pamphlets and also associated themselves, were totally 100 per cent committed, to the ideals of the march, gave us support through publicity and propaganda, and of course helped us to get the speakers. We had a really good array of speakers there, isn't there? We had Tambo, Huddleston, Bernadette Devlin and ... a wonderful experience. So we worked very closely with the Anti-Apartheid Movement throughout those two years.

CG: You remember going for two successive years on the march? I think it did go on afterwards

JS: I think that probably most of the students thought that having done it for two years in succession, it was enough, you know. It was very successful on the second occasion, but I suspect that we moved on to other things. And you don't have an annual march from Oxford to London over ... I thought that a nice time slot and it moved onto something else.

CG: What did you personally do after you left Ruskin? What union did you go to?

JS: Well, I had to decide whether to go back to being a telephone engineer or to try to find gainful employment. And I got a job as a full-time official with the Institute of Professional Civil Servants. From there I moved to the Civil Service Union, of which I became its General Secretary in '78, I suppose, and then I've been the General Secretary of four unions since then, through the merger process.

CG: What was the Civil Service Union – just help me clarify ...

JS: The Civil Service Union was a small union representing blue collar workers in the civil service. I represented the supporting grades of telephonists, the printers, the messengers, the cleaners, and I became its General Secretary. I was Deputy General Secretary in 1978 and General Secretary in 1982. Then I led the merger process and became the General Secretary of NUCPS, which took over the SCPS and then became the General Secretary of the PTC which took over the IRSF and I am now the General Secretary of the PCS which has taken over the CPSA – a bit of a megalomaniac really.^v

CG: Let's go back to the Wilf Isaacs cricket tour. How did that come about ... the demonstrations against that?

JS: I think the issues were broadly the same and it was a small group of people in Oxford who felt very strongly that this was an issue about which we could demonstrate and draw attention to the issue. One of the things about Ruskin College was that people were older, it didn't look like a student demonstration, so to a large extent we were able to bridge the gap between town and gown in a very meaningful way.

CG: Did you have Oxford University students joining in?

JS: Oh yes. That was particularly helpful in the other demonstrations going on at the time, in late '69 and '70, the issue of the students files, the political files kept by on students throughout the universities. It was quite helpful to have people with some experience of campaigning and industrial relations locked into that. So there was a significant political student network at the time, in which Ruskin College was a key player.

There were other demonstrations at Oxford at this time which were probably more important than the Kitson march. It was the start of the Stop the Seventy Tour and we had a committee in Oxford called the Fireworks Day Committee which I was again the Treasurer of – since I was probably the only one who could add up at the time – and the Fireworks Day Committee consisted of three people. One was Malcolm Reid. I can't remember the name of the other one, he was a schoolteacher, he was a member of the Communist Party in Oxford – we could research him. The South African Rugby Union team was due to tour the United Kingdom. Its first game was to be at Iffley Road and we had decided that we would stop that if we possibly could. So my recollection of this is – this is all from recollection, I have absolutely no record at all – was that the thing was due to start on November 5. This may not have been the case, but I am almost sure. Hence the name of the small committee was called the Fireworks Day Committee. It might have been some other student prank, but I cannot remember. We arranged for every college to take up its allocation of tickets. All of those tickets where possible to be taken up by students who were prepared to occupy the pitch. We knew that we had at least thousands, I can't remember how many, but more than half of the capacity of the ground, which might have only been about 1,500, that the student population of Oxford had tickets, more than half of them. The rest of the organisation for that was simple, the question of whistles etc. was a relatively simple procedure. What we had, however, and I might as well, I suppose it's public knowledge, but we had arranged for a diversion, in good military tactics – there was to be a march and demonstration outside the ground, on a moving platform, to be addressed by the then leader of the Liberal Party, whose name I can't remember.

CG: Jeremy Thorpe? David Steel?

JS: It's got to be Jeremy Thorpe. In order to make sure that the police thought that this was a broad political . . . we certainly didn't have any speakers from the Labour Party or other extremes, but went for the Liberal, which seemed to be the right thing at the time. So we had a massive march and demonstration planned, which had been organised with the police, everything had been done with the police. And I have to say that we thought that our tactics were impeccable until after having been questioned by the Thames Valley Police in their headquarters, which were then in Oxford, on the night previous to the Iffley Road match, and I can recall it as if it was yesterday – 15/20 senior policemen, all men, all in stripes and pips, interviewing Mac Reid and myself, and then taking us afterwards for a drink in their bar, and then returning home rather the worse for wear at 10 o'clock that evening, only to find out that as we'd been interviewed about our intentions at Iffley Road, they had switched the match to Twickenham.

CG: I remember that, because I went to Twickenham.

JS: Well, that night and all that day all of the coaches that we had organised for the demonstration to come to Iffley Road, they were diverted to Twickenham, all of them.

CG: What a brilliant piece of organisation!

JS: So I was delighted with that and that was perhaps – apart from getting arrested at Twickenham that day and us not being able to scale all of those bloody forms that they put in front, do you remember, they only let the crowd into two sides ...

CG: One side and we all stood shouting 'Sieg Heil' ...

JS: Behind the goals – well we tried to go from that, I suppose it's now the south stand, and to run over and to get onto the pitch and of course, you couldn't get past the policemen, with charges from the front and the back. But nevertheless that was the start of the big demonstrations then that we had then at Nottingham, Coventry, Cardiff and the Ruskin students played a big part in all of that. So that was the Fireworks Day Committee which was broadly my political involvement in these things.

CG: Can you remember what kind of liaison there was with other ... who co-ordinated it?

JS: Not much of a problem in the student network then of co-ordinating an anti-apartheid demonstration. We had contacts in every university and every technical college. The whole Fireworks Day Committee was run by three people from Ruskin.

CG: And did you have contacts? Can you remember what contacts you had with the Anti-Apartheid Movement as well?

JS: It certainly was not a formal network, the network all worked off pieces of paper. It wasn't too difficult for political activists. It was because the police knew that our diversionary tactics were ... that we had sufficient tickets to have occupied, they would not have been to stop us occupying the ground in Iffley Road. They would not have been able to do that, since we had half the bloody tickets.

CG: Were you a member of the Labour Party?

JS: Yes. I've been a member of the Labour Party all my life.

CG: ... I'm trying to site the whole thing in a political context.

JS: Well in a political context – the Communist Party was still strong industrially. In the late '60s, the Communist Party played a big role in these demonstrations and the International Socialists were very strong in the student community, and those two political organisations provided a network of contacts and the International Socialists, the IS as it was called, had a remarkable network of political activists which were available to support this sort of demonstration. The CP was very active, particularly in Oxford, but more generally speaking we had little difficulty collecting money for the Kitson thing.

CG: Did you have contacts at Cowley?

JS: Yes, I think it was the T&G No. 1 District, I can't remember, but certainly the liaison with the official Transport and General Workers Union was easy because we were all shop stewards, we were not students, we were shop stewards, so it was it was a nice conduit

between the shop stewards movement and the students at Ruskin, and via us, the broad student movement in Oxford.

CG: Did any car workers come on that demonstration?

JS: Yes, in fact on the first Kitson march a car worker who was severely disabled with only one leg came on the march with us and was very useful in collecting, a very key worker collecting money to fund the march as we went through the towns. I wish I could remember his name. But yes, there was lots of shop stewards that came on that march. It took four days, it was a four-day escapade, so they had to take their own holiday, not like us students.

CG: In 1969 Anti-Apartheid organised the first trade union conference about apartheid. It was in April 1969, at Ruskin. Do have any recollection of that?

JS: No. I must have been there.

CG: It was very small. It was the first time that Anti-Apartheid tried to organise an educational weekend conference for trade unionists.

JS: Do you think that was because of all the contacts at Ruskin and the Kitson stuff?
No, I can't recall that.

CG: After the rugby and cricket campaigns, Heath won the General Election and then Anti-Apartheid launched a campaign to stop the Tory government selling arms to South Africa. Do you have any recollection of doing anything in that?

JS: I think that by that time I had become a full-time trade union official and these things would have been taken on by other people.

CG: After you became a full-time trade union official, were you at all involved in the various civil service unions, in any anti-apartheid activity?

JS: In a personal capacity?

CG: Through the unions. Did those unions affiliate?

JS: Yes, through the unions, one of the first things that I did in the old CSU was to affiliate to the Anti-Apartheid Movement. The SCPS was already affiliated and very very active in the Anti-Apartheid Movement and so when we created NUCPS from those two, we had a seat on the Executive which I think was occupied by Mike Sparham. So Mike Sparham of course was a friend of mine, I was his boss. We were as active as any other trade union then in the Anti-Apartheid Movement and I think played a big part in the deliberations of the AAM.

CG: In general, could you make any general assessment of where rank and file trade unionists were active in relation to apartheid? Anti-apartheid, as an optimum, always wanted workers to 'black' goods for South Africa and they did get somewhere with the Leyland shop stewards committee who recommended 'blacking', but it didn't actually happen on the ground.

JS: There's always been a big difficulty for the British trade union movement about solidarity action and of course it was outlawed anyway by the Tories eventually, but certainly in the 1960s it was extremely difficult to mount blacking campaigns, on issues like this, on moral issues rather than on industrial issues. It was very difficult to make the two become one, a moral issue and an industrial issue. So blacking campaigns were in my view ill-advised and likely not to be successful, except on specific issues, and I am desperately trying to think of an odd one, waterfront issues where you could identify cargoes – from Australia. There was a huge blacking – in fact it was linked to an Aboriginal dispute, but it became linked to an industrial dispute.

CG: There was grapes too, from California.

JS: Yes, but they were linked to people being sacked for trade union activity. But the issue which really did catch the imagination, of course, was the boycott of South African goods, and the trade unions played a big big role in that through their magazines. We were the only organisations which had mass circulation and were able to help with the general campaign which members of parliament were running and the Anti-Apartheid Movement was running itself. We were big instruments in getting that campaign up and running, which I'm sure was successful too.

CG: Did you have the impression that a lot of trade unionists did boycott South African goods because they read about it in union journals?

JS: Yes, union journals – people suggest that people throw their union journals in the bin . . . it's not true, they would pick out what they want to read. Our approach was to make sure that they had to read it every month.

CG: What about Rhodesia and the Portuguese colonies? At the time that you were demonstrating on the rugby were you aware or interested in the Rhodesian issue?

JS: I think most political activists were aware.

CG: But did the anti-apartheid issue take priority?

JS: Oh yes, I think so. It did because it was – not easier – it would capture people's imaginations. It was about basic freedom, and you could translate it into class issue, which it was, which it is, it is an issue of social class. And the debates throughout the British trade union movement in the '70s, the '60s and '70s, were about social class, so it had a resonance that the issue of Rhodesia did not.

CG: There was also ... it's interesting that the rugby campaign took off, because at that time there wasn't a lot going on in the way of resistance, overt resistance, in South Africa.

JS: It was right to choose your moment. All politics are about that – to choose your moment. I was a lot more frightened of the Rugby Union supporters than I was of the police, you know. But test the issue now, the issue of Rugby Union was that it was all upper-class, middle-class kids, there was no black players playing Rugby Union. There's black players playing rugby union now. And I think that we've had an important effect on sport and it was in fact the spin off was 'Keep politics out of sport', which was an ideal opportunity for people like us to say

'Well, politics and sport are one and the same thing' and we must try to have a mature discussion about the effects of politics on sport. And particularly then as you move into the late '70s you have people like Geoff Boycott and others, who was a particular hero of mine, being a Yorkshireman, went to South Africa and Ian Botham did not go to South Africa, and it was a wonderful illustration of politics in sport and we were able to have the debate between two very popular people about what was right and what was wrong. And people took sides and people argued about it and it was wonderful.

CG: So do you think sport was really a good way in?

JS: Oh, yes, absolutely, because – I am fiercely working class as you can probably gather – that's what people talk about. They don't talk about the antics of Tony Blair, they talk about the effects of working life on them. And they talk about their sport. And so if you can link that into the concept of the idea about justice and fair play ... sport is a wonderful opportunity to influence people's political thinking. And when Ian Botham said 'I would not go to South Africa because I could not have looked my friend Viv Richards in the face', that had more impact on British working people than ever any statement by Tony Blair would have had. I have to say that – full of my own prejudices!

CG: Are people worried about their bank accounts? Were you involved in the Barclays campaign?

JS: No, I think I had enough to do! But I think it was a good campaign. That's another illustration, you take an issue and you campaign. The issue itself then broadens – a wonderful opportunity, wasn't it?

CG: Do you think sanctions was a good issue to campaign on?

JS: I do, yes. Because it was an issue that people had to debate, because there was an argument against sanctions. There was a perfectly legitimate, no – reasonable – argument that to reduce economic activity was damaging to working people, and that had to be debated. And it had to be set in the context that it was the black South Africans, organised labour, that was seeking sanctions, and it was a wonderful opportunity to describe how black South Africans were trying to organise trade unions. So there was a number of issues that came from that sanctions campaign.

CG: There was always a bit of a disagreement between the Anti-Apartheid Movement and the TUC about the best way of combating apartheid. And the TUC did incline towards supporting emerging black unions, whereas in the '70s Anti-Apartheid was always banging away about sanctions. What do you think about that debate?

JS: Well it was a debate, it was happening.

CG: What I'm really asking is – was it the best thing to do, to be calling for sanctions as a priority over supporting trade unions.

JS: Yes, I'm absolutely convinced that that was right. In fact I didn't think that we should try to prioritise it, I think the two things were one and the same thing. I had absolutely no problem with that intellectually at all. In fact my own unions as we've been through that have developed

extraordinarily strong links with our opposite numbers in South Africa. We have twinning arrangements with COSATU. Our regions are twinned with COSATU [Congress of South African Trade Unions] regions and NEHAWU [National Education, Health and Allied Workers Union] regions. We send our officials across for educational purposes now and we developed those links over 20 years. In fact, for the last 15 years a South African trade unionist has gone on a civil service trade union sponsored scholarship to the Northern College. And we've done those things at the same time as we've been campaigning, you know, so I never saw that it was a contradiction at all. I thought it was an artificial difference.

CG: Can you remember when the union you were involved in – at whatever time – did get involved in direct connections?

JS: No I don't. It seems to me to have been forever, but it clearly was not. One of the ex-presidents of the SCPS was very very active in the politics of that and we created a scholarship, the Mike Perkins Scholarship,^{vi} so it was the Mike Perkins Scholarship that brought people over, black South Africans. Now I can't remember just when.

CG: Thanks, John.

ⁱ The Ruskin College Kitson Committee organised marches from Oxford to London, 23–26 May 1969 and 22–25 May 1970.

ⁱⁱ The Draughtsmen and Allied Technicians Association (DATA) became the Technical, Administrative and Supervisory Section (TASS) of the AUEW (Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers) in 1971.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ken Gill was the General Secretary of the draughtsmen's union TASS.

^{iv} UCATT was the building workers union.

^v NUCPS – National Union of Civil and Public Servants; PTC – Public Services, Tax and Commerce Union; SCPS – Society of Civil and Public Servants; IRSF – Inland Revenue Staff Federation; CPSA – Civil and Public Services Association.

^{vi} Mike Perkins died of a heart attack in 1987 aged 47.