

**Interview with Sean O'Donovan by Lauren Carsley, 18th September 2013, for the Anti-Apartheid Movement Archives Committee project Forward to Freedom**

*Lauren Carsley: For the record would you state your full name.*

Sean O'Donovan: Sean O'Donovan.

*LC: So when and where were you born?*

SO: I was born in the UK, although I'm Irish, but I was born in the UK in 1957.

*LC: What do you or did you do for a living?*

SO: I'm a caseworker for a Member of Parliament.

*LC: Have you been involved in any other political or campaigning activity apart from anti-apartheid such as a political party or other campaigns?*

SO: Yes, I'm a member of the Labour Party in the UK and also the Irish Labour Party, and I've been involved in CND [Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament] and anti-racism campaigns and various other campaigns over the years. Well I... I grew up aware of what was happening in South Africa and then what was then Rhodesia that became Zimbabwe and the injustice that was happening, so I've always been a supporter of anti-apartheid issues and I think boycotted South African fruit when I was growing up, but I suppose what really got me involved was when I was in university at Middlesex [Polytechnic]. Like all universities, the students had a lot of political organisations and there was a meeting about anti-apartheid. Different parties from the left came along and, students do a lot of this, they spent a lot of time arguing about who had the right critique of apartheid and knew the best way forward. And when they argued themselves out, there was a young black man who stood up and said his name was Andile and he was a member of the ANC and he had come over from South Africa and he was asked to come over by the ANC to study to become an engineer. And he said, 'Look, what's really important to me is you have all your differences, but over the issue of apartheid and support on South Africa you should put those all to one side, because we're all actually on the same side'. And a lot of people that did not like the idea of unity disappeared, but a sizeable number remained and we formed an anti-apartheid group, a broad based anti-apartheid movement, and then we made contact with the Haringey Anti-Apartheid Group, which I – that was back in '84 and I remained a member and organiser of Haringey Anti-Apartheid Group up until thankfully it was able to disband around '93, '94 time.

*LC: So what was your specific role in the group?*

SO: In Haringey Anti-Apartheid I started off as an activist who was willing to go out, leaflet and go on to do all the various things we did. I became Secretary, then I was Secretary for most of the time, although at one time I became Chair of the group and I

was also part of the London Committee which was ... all the local anti-apartheid representatives would meet once a month. So I was on that London Anti Apartheid Movement and came on to the National Executive of the Anti-Apartheid Movement in later years, but I always remained an activist in Haringey.

*LC: Could you describe the general dynamic of both committees you mentioned that you were involved with – the Haringey Committee and the London Committee. What it was like to interact with people?*

SO: Yes, I think the Haringey one was very much based on action. Our meetings would be relatively short in terms of debate, there would be debate, but relatively short – what is the next activity that we are going to do. And we did for at least the next two years have one or two activities, maybe more than that, every week. We would have a stall outside a supermarket ... if we were ... at that point it was Tesco's we were boycotting and later there were other supermarkets. It was the organisation of who would come along, who had been there, the paste table to begin with. It used to be one of those wooden tables you used to use to hang wallpaper which we used for the basis of a stall, someone had to bring that along, someone had to bring along the leaflets, and do balloons, and then obviously there would be a rota, and people would maybe come for an hour or two hours. We had to make sure if we were going to do it for more than that, there would have to be enough people. There was always a lot of enthusiasm and activists – we used to get a lot of people to do that. And we used to have sort of information stalls where we used to attend – if other people had meetings and things, we might attend those as well. So yes, the dynamic was a very positive one, and I think people in the main got along very well and had one objective in mind.

*LC: And what was that?*

SO: That was to end apartheid, and as you probably know most political organisations have a view in mind, but it's very rare to get to the end of it. We were one organisation that could disband because what we wanted, which was the right of the people of South Africa, both black and white, to elect their own government in a fair way, that was achieved, and the people of South Africa could rule themselves. Obviously after – and it was jumping on a bit – but after apartheid there was a role for other organisations which was ACTSA [Action for Southern Africa], which was more to do with making sure there was solidarity and making sure people didn't forget about South Africa, making sure the things they needed were available. The anti-apartheid part of it was successful, in the aim that we wanted to achieve. Whether in history other people will judge what then came out of the struggle in southern Africa.

*LC: So, when you look back on your experience, campaigning, are there are any particular incidents that stand out? And if so would you be able to describe them?*

SO: Yes, I mean there are so many. Because when you were coming here I tried to find all the press cuttings. There are so many of them I didn't have time to get them all together. But we were on a regular basis doing regular activities that would gain

publicity. I will talk later about how we used the local papers and everything. I think there was one occasion when there was a supermarket, it was a big day for the supermarket, they were opening a new store, a new shop. They had their dignitaries along and wanted their publicity, but we also wanted to make the point that they would be selling South African goods, so we had a sign outside. We invited the local Member of Parliament and we invited the mayor and we had a stall. Coincidentally, the people inside also invited the Member of Parliament and the mayor because they wanted them to welcome the store. You had this thing where the store owners saw the mayor and MP with us rather than inside. They said, 'Hey, could you come inside and cut the ribbon?' They did go in, they invited a number of us to go with them, they went to the fresh fruit stall. One of them picked up an orange, another picked up an apple, and they said, 'Look, these are South African. Why are you selling South African fruit?' The story in the paper the next day was the story that we wanted to have in there. The store owners were very embarrassed. It didn't get them to change their mind, as the decision was made much further up, but that was the way in which, yes, we got good publicity.

In terms of publicity, what we tried to do, with everything we did, was make sure everybody knew about it. So if you had arranged to have a stall outside the supermarket, make it so that everyone in the store would know about it. And what we normally did was not a picket saying to people, 'Don't go into this store'. What we were saying was, 'If you go into the store, be aware that they sell South African goods, be aware that they sell South African oranges and apples, and then tell your friends not to do that. While you're here, you might as well take a leaflet or buy a badge or something like that.' So all of those people would have seen us, over the weeks would see us again and again and again, which they would then get the idea, 'Oh these people don't just come once, they are really committed, let's find out what they are really committed to'. People would be really friendly to us; there was really very little animosity. In order for other people to get to know about it we would try to get into the local papers and so have a different twist. At one point we had a local jazz band, at other times various leaflets or banners. We got an art group to do things. It was always eye catching, it would always, well maybe not always, but most of the time we would have that in the local paper or something else in the local paper. It was very rarely a week would go by and there wouldn't be something in the paper about anti-apartheid – just build the momentum of people realising because they see it on the television, and they think, 'Oh, what can I do?'. And then they see it in the local paper, and they think, 'Oh this is something I can do, this looks like a big issue', and things like that. And the other reason for using the local paper was that quite often the national papers wouldn't, they'd cover South Africa but not in a very positive way, whereas the local papers were looking for positive stories about local people and as long as – you know, children are always good, a few religious people are always good. We weren't exploiting them, they wanted to come along, the jazz band wanted to come along. It was all in all a positive thing. We weren't using people. They were happy to be a part of it. From '85 up until the early '90s there was a huge amount of stories that we managed to get into the papers to build that momentum.

*LC: So, looking back through all these press clippings, what are your feelings about your involvement in the anti-apartheid campaigns?*

SO: I'm proud of my personal involvement, but I'm also proud of all the other people who took part. It does say, 'Oh I was quoted here, quoted there'. But it was only because I was the one who was doing the press releases, and sometimes I would get someone else to make a comment but... It looks going through it like I was mentioned quite a lot, because I was one of the organisers, but there were three or four of us working equally hard doing it virtually every day. That was a time of quite high unemployment like it is now, so there were people without jobs who were able to do that. So I am very proud of those three or four other people who worked incredibly hard, but I am also very proud of the people who, you know, maybe did something once or twice a week or were just members. We had about 500 members, it's a relatively small area so to have 500 members, we achieved quite a bit, we achieved a hell of a lot, with limited resources as well. We didn't have any money. We didn't have any big grants from anybody. I think the membership was something like £3, which pretty much paid for postage. In those days we had to post things out to, or to telephone people, which cost money. And now I look and think how much more we could do if we had texts and emails and all those types of things. It was incredible that we did it without all of those things. First, when someone said they would be somewhere at a certain time you had to trust they would be – 90% of the time they would be. Now you might send out an email five or ten minutes before meeting with somebody saying you can't make it. And yes, if you wrote them a note, a newsletter like these newsletters we used to produce, you had to trust they would read it and pick out the information. And telephone calls, there were no mobiles, so if they were at the pub and missed a call you had to try to call them later. It was a long time ago, I suppose it is, 25 years or so perhaps, it was a long time ago.

*LC: Do you think you could tell me more about the press clippings you have over here?*

SO: Yes, this is just a small amount ... this is the jazz band that we got to come along. And this one, oh yes, everyone brought their banners along, made a nice backdrop. This is one time we actually went into the store. Not the same store as mentioned before. But the fact that we got rejected. We didn't actually do it for publicity, we did it to make a point.

*LC: This is one about the Tottenham Tesco.*

SO: Yes, yes. And then we were also boycotting Shell. We got a banner. Banners are useful obviously, because people can see them. And sometimes we used to get the local press to come along. Other times we would take a photograph and post it in. We would make sure to have a camera. In those days, and I'm sounding really old, in those days you couldn't email it to them. Because there was no colour photography in the local papers, one of the local press people said if you're going to send in a photograph try to send in a black and white photograph, we had to try to buy black and white film, which wasn't easy. There was a little place in Soho which professional photographers used, it would print black and white pictures on a professional level very quickly, so sometimes we would have to go there on a Sunday morning after a demo and queue in line with professional photographers and they got to know us there and sort of knocked a bit off

the price when they knew what we were doing. So, as I said, it was good to have children. We did get quite a bit of support from local celebrities. I don't know if you know Chris Hughton, he played for Tottenham and he played for Ireland. He is now manager for Norwich.

*LC: What was his role in the campaign?*

SO: We wrote to quite a lot of people in the public eye. Most of the time they wouldn't write back because they just never saw it. We wrote to Spurs because we knew Chris had been involved in political things before. We wrote to him and he said he would be very happy to come along. The important thing with people, you realise, they are very busy. So when you get them to do something you can't use them every week. It was around the time the cricket team was about to go South Africa; there was a lot of campaigning against that. So although he's a footballer, he very kindly put on his pads so we could do a publicity thing. We had an anti-apartheid football game. He came over one day after training. We had him in the local papers but because he was Irish there is a picture of me and him in the Irish Post as well. And Judith Jacobs, who is – used to be – on Eastenders, quite a long time ago she was quite a long time ago on Eastenders, she lives quite locally in Tottenham, she would get involved, we used her for a few things. We managed to get a picture of her in the thing we organised. I photographed – it's quite small – for the Star. I think she was going to play in a cricket game. For this one, quite a memorable campaign, we decided to write to all of ... we got a list of all the greengrocers from Tottenham area to all of Hornsey. We got a letter that Bernie Grant, a local Member of Parliament signed and the Anti-Apartheid Group signed, and it was to say ... you know, 'We assume you sell South African goods'. It wasn't to get them to stop selling them, but it was to get them labelled as South African, because what used to happen, the Cape and other people they used to talk to greengrocers, sell these goods, but don't tell them that's its South African. So we were writing to them to say, 'If you're going to sell South African goods, label them as South African', hoping that they would them stop selling them. We got about 500 letters that we spent a few nights putting into envelopes and stamping and everything and we got Judith to come along and post in a post box and some photographers came by from the Morning Star. They'd say it was a gimmick, it was a way of doing something different to get into the papers. The person I mentioned, Bernie Grant, who was a Member of Parliament, Bernie Grant, he was the first black Member of Parliament in the campaign. That's a picture of him. He was very involved in all sorts of things that we used to do. If we weren't doing something he would always remind us to do something – that's a picture of him, he actually made a record, a rap record which is actually still on YouTube about South Africa. Sadly he died in the year 2000 but he was very much involved.

This is the other thing I should have mentioned when you asked me what we were proud of. We managed to get a street in Muswell Hill called Nelson Mandela Close and that's him at the opening of it. It was a new area and didn't have a name. It was a time when it felt very important that the name Mandela as a symbol of the struggle should be remembered. And I suppose what this demonstrates is the one thing people were saying, all of this seems quite easy, you organise demos, everyone supports you, you

get celebrities along, people warm to the idea, but actually there was a lot of opposition to you in the background. There were people who would come up to you on the streets and say, 'I am in support of apartheid', and when the idea of naming Nelson Mandela Close came up, there was stuff in the local papers about 'Why are we naming it after him, he is a terrorist, he is in jail he should be in jail. There are local people you could name it after'. For four or five weeks there was backwards and forwards of whether it was a good idea or bad idea. In the end, the overwhelming view of the local people was that you should call it Nelson Mandela Close. If there are local people you can name streets, you can mark them in other ways. It was important for that close to be called Mandela at the time, it is still called Mandela Close. One of the things when Mandela was let out of prison, besides thanking people for the boycott, he said we found in prison you were naming buildings streets for us and that really energised us. It was a little street in Muswell Hill, that and the other ones.

The other thing that we did, well it was actually a Council idea, but it had a lot of opposition, was that Oliver Tambo lived locally, who was, he was actually the President of the ANC. Mandela was his deputy. At the time when Mandela went into jail, it was felt rather than Oliver Tambo going to jail, it would be better if he went into exile. So he spent a long time in this area down by Alexandra Palace, that's where he lived a lot of his life, though he used to travel around a lot. Him and his wife, and his children grew up there. It was the time, in the early '90s, Haringey Council decided to give him the freedom of the borough, and then again there was huge opposition to that, with people saying, 'Oh, we should be proud that they live in our area'. That article probably covers it as well. There's another one, 'Exile found freedom'. That was actually when Nelson Mandela came to visit the area, which he did of course when he got out of hospital, I mean out of prison. 'Surprise visit to Muswell Hill', another one – if you just go down the road, it's a predominantly poor working class area where a lot of black people settled. In the 1920s it was where a lot of Jewish people settled, 1950s where black Caribbean people settled, now it's a mixture of Caribbean, Turkish, Somalian, English, Irish everybody. The other part of Haringey, Crouch End, Muswell Hill, up to Archway, that's the richer area. It's a mix of richer areas and poorer areas. Through maybe accident or other reasons, a lot of South African exiles settled in the Muswell Hill area and Tottenham to some extent, and that's one of the reasons Haringey Anti-Apartheid was so successful, it had Tottenham and thus you realised why it was so important, but you also had a family connection because South African people were involved. It was a real centre of anti-apartheid stuff. Nelson Mandela did come to visit, he did come to visit Oliver Tambo's old home, but that was later on, when the rest of the South African people had won their freedom.

[...]

We realised local papers carried information. If it was Irish news they would carry it, or Caribbean papers like the *Caribbean Times*, which would also carry stories. So if we were doing something we thought would be interesting we would tell them. So we had a thing in Tesco's, which we had in the *Caribbean Times* and they wrote an article and I'm quoted somewhere there for some reason. And what we did the next time we went out to

leaflet outside of Tesco's, we had an article and membership form and we sort of used the article to get members. And waged £[inaudible], unwaged £1 [AAM membership subscription]. It was very cheap back in those days.

*LC: Did you find that that was enough funding?*

SO: We used to get members, yes, and because we had their name and address we could keep in touch with them and invite them to other things as well – quite often, people join something and then they are never seen again. Or they might give money, whereas I think quite a good percentage of Haringey Anti-Apartheid membership did want to do something. So they did, even if it was just leaflets or spending half an hour at a street store, they wanted to do things. The other way that we got the word around – we organised some public meetings in the young [inaudible], in the earlier times, in the early years. We'd have, if there was a speaker in town who was from a union in South Africa, a trade union in South Africa, or an ANC person, or somebody who had got a particular story, we'd invite them along to a meeting and then we'd invite people to come and listen to them. But we found that it wasn't ... people tend not to come, you got an audience of maybe 20 or 30, you wouldn't get a big audience. What we did to be more effective in later times was that we would find out when other people were holding meetings, like a political party would have lots of meetings, the Labour Party had lots of meetings, the Liberals would have lots of meetings, churches might have meetings, trade unions would have meetings, and we'd sort of, we'd write to them and say, 'Can we come along and talk to you for five or ten minutes?', so there would be a ready made audience. And they'd be very happy, because they'd want to know about South Africa. And we'd speak to them, we'd answer questions, they'd want to get involved, people might join. So in that way, it was a good way, we could again reach out to people, because they were already interested, either politically interested, if they were religious they'd be interested in humanity, so it was easy for them, for us to say, 'Well, this is what is really happening in South Africa'. It did not always come across in the national media or the national papers what was really happening. And also the important thing is how you can make a difference. And that was if anything that was the thing we used to say to people, that you can make a difference. And I suppose what is happening now maybe in Syria and other countries – and things with famine – people want to make a difference and they're not quite sure how to do it, whereas then it was pretty clear, 'Don't buy South African goods' is a big step, and it did make a big difference. That was a building block among all the other building blocks. Any other questions?

*LC: I just wanted to know if there was anything else you wanted to bring up, any other stories or maybe describe a typical meeting?*

SO: You know, it's funny, when I was talking to Christabel we were reminiscing about all these things, all these odd things that happened, but then when you decide to ... it's one of those things when if you have a few drinks, reminiscing with other people, all these things come back into mind, yes, some funny anecdotes. There were lots of little things ... I mean I can't ... yes, I think also I suppose, because we're doing the same thing, you had, you could have, go and have a drink, there used to be quite a lot of social things

happening as well, which I suppose I have forgotten, fundraising and things. There used to be somebody who was very much involved in promotion, so he used to do – not huge comedy things, it was the start of the whole alternative comedy, new variety, as they called it. He used to hire out the whole trade union centre, and would greet and get people to come along, and I think at those times, we had French and Saunders starting out their career. He managed to get them to come to an anti-apartheid thing, other comedians would come out to do it, it wasn't just the huge things at Wembley – 200,000 people in the park – they were sort of gathering, on Saturdays watching comedy or music, and I suppose it was a time we all felt eventually things would change. You just had to keep pushing it. Bishop Huddleston, he was the cleric who started, he managed to break out the whole story into the wider community by his book, *Naught for Your Comfort*, and he was a bishop over there and he came back, and he was a bishop here. The moral compass of the Movement – he became the Chair of the Anti-Apartheid Movement. Really involved in everything. He used to say at meetings, 'I know you all say apartheid will end in your lifetime. But I want you to remember that I'm 80 and my lifetime isn't as long as yours, so I think you should speed up a bit'. And there was always that sort of, we're doing it, but we need to do more. There was always more that you could do. You asked about the London Committee as well, didn't you?

*LC: Yes, I did.*

SO: That was quite important because what that did was bring, we were doing it in our little area, and other people were doing it in Enfield and Hackney and ... but it was important once a month to come together and share, because we didn't have websites, you didn't have WhatsApp and Facebook to let you know what was happening. You know, you had to meet up with people, and say we have a really good, there's this really good jazz band they might do something for you, or someone else might have an idea about good graphics they used that they would lend to us. And it was also a way of supporting groups who weren't so ... who didn't do so much, so they didn't feel they were isolated in the way they were going to help us. We went along and helped them with their protests as well. It was in London, it was a good way of organising all the groups, getting together, and then we did our widest gathering of the National Committee to find out what they were about in Bristol and Liverpool and Birmingham, things like that, hear what people were doing in Ireland, anti-apartheid groups in other countries as well. It built up to [the idea] that you weren't on your own, you're not, even if it got to a stage where people didn't turn up, and there were only two of you outside Tesco's and it was getting very cold, and you weren't getting a good reception from people, you never really felt, 'Oh, you're on your own, I'm going to give up', because there was always, you always felt you were a part of something bigger as well. [laughs] I can't actually remember any at the moment, but there were some laughs as well along the line, along the way. There's this newsletter, I remember staying up until 4 o'clock in the morning, trying to get ... it doesn't look that stylish, but it took a lot of sorting out, and making sure it fitted.

*LC: What's the name of the newsletter?*



SO: I think it means power [Matla!]. Well, actually looking at it, that's just September and October. And that's just all local stuff. You can see all the stuff that we were doing. So the national organisation, you might be interviewing people who used to work in Mandela Street, which was where the national anti-apartheid, where the people like Mike Terry worked, who was the Secretary, and the other officers were there, and that was the place where they wrote the *Anti-Apartheid News*, and designed the leaflets and did all the usual stuff you get the national organisation to do. So they would, yes, South African Political Prisoners Day was named in South Africa, and then the national organisation would work out, what can we do, what can we do join that particular date to draw attention to South African Political Prisoners Day, so they would do something nationally, probably with Bishop Huddleston, do something that might get into the national papers or television. But they would also through the London Committee and other information they used to send to us, they would suggest local groups, what we could do. So we might have to do something quite local, we might, you know, there might be a church you had to go to, to talk about Prisoners Day, or it might be some other sort of newsworthy thing that we could do. So the idea would be it would happen in South Africa and then it would happen in other countries, and then it would then be broken down in the local areas as well. And the other thing the national organisation did was an International Week of Action in Namibia. They would, the National Committee or someone, would say, 'Let's have an international week of action at the end of September, or end of October, around Namibia'. And then a few months before, we would work out exactly what we would do to do that, and the national organisation might produce leaflets we could then order copies of, or make our own leaflets. So, yes, we were working together. There's the Shell motorcade – what about that? They – in terms of, I suppose, because the Anti-Apartheid Movement actually started before as the boycott organisation. So the idea was, internationally, if you support the cause of freedom in South Africa, the obvious thing to do is – South Africa wants to sell stuff to other countries, so if we boycott it, it will weaken them and hopefully over time it will persuade them that they should change their views. And then, as it developed more, it wasn't just boycott everything, although we would have liked people to boycott everything, but that was a bit diffuse. You don't really, what do you mean, 'Boycott everything'? What is easier to grasp is if you isolate a company. In the beginning it was Barclays and we boycotted them not because of what South Africa produced, but because they did a lot of business with South Africa. In those days, it was the main four or five banks you banked with, there wasn't all the banks they have these days, so that was an easy message, 'Don't open an account with Barclays'. It was even better because students – one of the first things they do when they go to university or college is they open an account and you made sure the students didn't open Barclay Bank accounts. That really affected them. I remember the first week I was in university, which was Middlesex Polytechnic back then, somebody came up to me with a clipboard. 'Can I do a survey?' And I was like 'Yes', and she didn't say which organisation she was with, but afterwards all the pointed questions were, 'Have you been asked not to bank with a banking company, and if so, which company? What do you feel about that? What do you think could persuade you to bank with this company?' It was clear they got so worried that they sent people out with clipboards to find out 'If we offer you a £10 cash back or something will you carry on banking with us?' That was Barclays, which was really

successful. In terms of supermarkets, again, we probably could get all of the supermarkets, but that is a bit diffuse, you concentrate on Tesco's, and that is why a lot of this stuff is about Tesco's, although we used to do Safeways as well, but Tesco's is the one you concentrate on. And then later on, I think we have a photograph of that Shell protest somewhere, that was on the front page of the paper. Shell was the one, I think this was back in – what year is that, '89? – so that links to that, Shell motorcade, we realised you get lots of publicity doing that. The other way of getting publicity and spreading it London-wide was to have a motorcade. You go to one Shell station and then go to another Shell station. So I remember that was a hell of a lot of organising, we had to find out all the Shell stations on our way, and all the Shell stations in central boroughs, and then work out a way, where would the motorcade start, how would people get to the start, how many vehicles would you need? And then what was the route you could go around London, visiting as many? We would all jump out, leaflet, talk to people, jump in and go to the next one. And that took up most of a Saturday, but it got us a lot of publicity. So that was something that happened, on a London-wide basis. Yes, I mean there were other committee meetings, we had regular meetings but also sub-committees and we had a boycott committee, and a material aid sub-committee, a women's sub-committee, and they would just organise in the various things. That's a bit of background somebody wrote.