

Interview with Kath Harding by Penny Capper and Jonathan Dobson on 14 December 2012, reproduced on the Anti-Apartheid Movement Archives Committee Forward to Freedom project website <http://www.aamarchives.org/>

Jonathan Dobson: We just wanted to know how you got involved, how you originally got involved in the Anti-Apartheid Movement?

Kath Harding: OK, well I first got involved when I was living in London and prior to that I had been involved in, quite active in CND, but I'd never been particularly involved in party politics, but when I was living in London, it was partly to do with, I started a relationship with someone who has been my husband now for a long time, and he was very involved in the Anti-Apartheid Movement. So part of it was just that he was involved and so I became much more aware of the issues and got involved as well, really as a result of that. So I was active in London for, I don't know how many years, probably maybe a couple of years active in London, maybe not as long as that actually, but yes, a couple of years, and then when we moved up to Sheffield we got involved in the Anti-Apartheid Movement here. So that was in about, we came to Sheffield in 1986, so I would have been involved from about 1984 onwards.

Penny Capper: Were you involved up to the ANC being voted in in Africa?

KH: Yes, I was involved until the Anti-Apartheid Movement was, essentially, stood down, but then I was lucky enough to be asked to go to South Africa and do some work there, not as a part of my anti-apartheid activities, although I think that was obviously a factor. I did a couple of two-week consultancies for the ANC government in the Free State, so that was really great to be able to go and go legitimately, and yes, although it took a long time to stop not buying South African goods, that kind of thing, it just became such an ingrained thing that we didn't, and then suddenly you had to start, you know, because you wanted to support the new South Africa, so that was quite weird really but yes, that was my involvement.

JD: What organisations were you involved with in Sheffield?

KH: Just Sheffield Anti-Apartheid Movement, I think, I was trying to remember this morning in preparation for this interview. I think I was the Chair, but yes basically there were a few of us who were very active, over what was probably only a three or four year period, but it felt like we did a lot in that time, and so I'm pretty certain I was the Chair. I think you have, but no you haven't interviewed Paul Blomfield yet, but I think some of your colleagues have, because I'm pretty sure that Paul was the Secretary and I was the Chair. I think it was that way round or it might have been the other way round. I can't remember but there were a number of us that had positions, and I was also partially involved, we also established a Southern Africa Resources Centre, which was a resource centre for people who were interested in the whole of the Southern African region, so that was something else that we were engaged in. So those were the things that I was involved in.

PC: What kind of things did you do, in regards to not buying South African foods? What sort of other things did you do?

KH: Well, we also had a lot of meetings, we used to do meetings and we did quite a lot of fundraising events and we did a lot of going out and campaigning. Most of what we did was about the people's boycott or asking people to boycott organisations that were actively involved in investing in the regime, and the main things that I remember being involved with was Tesco's, we used to stand outside Tesco on Eccleshall Road quite often, Shell and

Barclays Bank, but mostly in Sheffield it was Tesco's and Shell, that's what I remember. We were mostly either boycotting Shell or getting people to boycott Shell or Tesco's.

JD: Do you have any particular achievements, from when you were a part of that group, any big major moment where you felt you made a major difference?

KH: I think all of us just felt that we were really doing what we could to support the people who were actually really doing the struggling. It was more about taking a lead from what comrades in South Africa wanted the help with, and I suppose there were sometimes divisions, and I certainly can't remember the specifics of them, but different political factions had different views on what should be done. And I think my personal view was always that whatever the ANC, whatever was coming from there, was what we ought to do. So if they were asking for a boycott, then that's what we should be doing, if they were asking for other kinds of support, then that's what we should be doing, because we were supporting other people's struggle really. So no, I don't recall any sort of major personal achievements, I mean it was obviously, you know the day that Mandela was freed from prison was fantastic for anyone who cared at all about it. I remember we were watching it on the telly, and watched him come out and it was amazing, it was absolutely fantastic to see, but I think we all felt really what we did was just what little we could do to do something about the injustice. So whatever part we played we were glad we played it, but I definitely don't think, I don't have any personal sort of feeling that it was something particular I did other than just take part in it.

PC: Did you have any contact with other anti-apartheid groups? The two big ones that we're focusing on are Sheffield and Bristol, so did you have any contact between the two?

KH: I'm sure we did, but I don't really remember. We used to participate, we were always going down to London for meetings, we would have delegates to the national Anti-Apartheid. I can't remember the names of the things, but there was a national meeting and so we would go as Sheffield delegates to that, so we did work with other people. There would be annual conferences. I would have known people, but I don't remember any particular – all of the local anti-apartheid groups were operating together to the extent that all the campaigns were national campaigns. We weren't just in Sheffield thinking 'Oh, let's boycott Tesco's, let's go', it was a national decision, same as Shell. So in that sense yes, but it wasn't like we were on the phone to each other all the time. You have to remember that the times were so incredibly different, just in terms, now, we'd all be on Facebook and we'd be tweeting, but then we were still printing stuff on a litho printer and we didn't have computers and – bizarre as it's not that long ago – but in terms of technology and potential communication it's a lifetime ago.

JD: Just going back, these national meetings, what were they about, what would you discuss there?

KH: Policy, a bit similar to, I don't know if you've been to any party conferences or anything like that, but motions and seconding motions, and quite dry to be honest, not that exciting, but necessary, about setting policy, strategy, what we were going to do and who would have taken the lead on certain things. There would have been a lot of people who would have much clearer recollections of who was coming from where politically, because there was political strife from within the Movement, that was for sure, but there will be people who have much better memories of that. But quite often it would be about how to make sure that people were all working towards the same thing, in the same direction, not going off on a tangent.

PC: You said that you did the boycotts outside Tesco and Shell ...

KH: Yes.

PC: Was there a lot of people in Sheffield that supported that and didn't buy South African products?

KH: Yes, at that time again, Sheffield was known as a very left-wing city, a very politically active city. The council was very supportive of the Anti-Apartheid Movement, they had an international office and the international officer, Steve Howell, was actively involved in the Anti-Apartheid Movement from his own personal point, but also it was part of his job to support the anti-apartheid work. The trade unions were involved, so really it was very, it was quite a mainstream campaign really, and yes, of course you got people who said it was a load of old rubbish, I'm still going into Tesco's, but mainly people were supportive. Largely I'd say in Sheffield you were pushing at an open door and people generally were pretty supportive. There were times when it was difficult, I think the major thing that people had a problem with was the armed struggle, that's what people struggled with, ordinary people in the street, who felt that the racist society was terrible, but who struggled with the notion of the armed struggle and therefore would just sometimes find it quite difficult to completely support, because they would say 'Would you support people who blow up civilians and stuff?' That's very simplistic, but it was more that you had to spend quite a lot of time working on that issue rather than people who were overtly racist, it was more that people had issues with that, really.

JD: On that note, was there any major opposition from people in Sheffield?

KH: No, not that I recall. I mean at that time, obviously the politics in Sheffield has changed massively over, well not massively but has changed significantly, but at that time the council was Labour led and many of the councillors themselves were involved. I don't recall any significant opposition, and again, you know, very fortunately, and I think this is something we should be really proud of, in Sheffield we've never had a massive right wing, real active EDL [English Defence League], BNP [British National Party], the manifestations made, you know, we never had a massive sort of issue with organised racist groups in a way that other big cities did, like Leeds, Manchester, much more of an issue there, whereas Sheffield has just always had this, I think it was always a very tolerant city and of course I'm sure there are racists around, but not, it was never really, in that I don't think we ever felt frightened of being out campaigning in a way that, I think in other places it was a bit more scary sometimes. I don't recall ever feeling frightened and thinking, 'I'm sticking my head above the parapet here'. Of course there were times when people disagreed with you, but never in a threatening way that I recall, but that could just be the haze of 25 years ago.

PC: Do you think that David Blunkett as head of Sheffield City Council declaring that Sheffield was an anti-apartheid city encouraged more support in Sheffield than, say, in Manchester, where they weren't specifically an anti-apartheid city?

KH: I don't know that, I'm sure that that had an impact. I don't recall that particularly having an impact, I just recall that that would be a representation of the flavour of the city at the time, that people would generally have thought that that was the right thing to do, and so David Blunkett was obviously showing leadership with that, but also leadership in a city where that was felt to be the right thing. I think that Sheffield has had a reputation for that sort of – it's quite a political city and a city where there's a feeling that you should do

something and that it's not right to let injustice lie, and certainly at that time I think it would just have been seen as the right thing to do. Whether it motivated people to get involved I don't know, but we always had a pretty active anti-apartheid group, so I'm sure everything contributed to it.

JD: In hindsight, is there anything changed now, like looking back on what you did back then, like views?

KH: No, not at all, not my view. I, you know I still, I can still remember, I mean one of the things I find shocking about my own education, and I don't think that would be the case now, but you know, I went to a perfectly good school etc. etc., but I can remember being taught about South Africa and being told that there was one ambulance for white people and another ambulance for black people and various things, but they never taught us to question that in any way. I can just remember it being told to me and that was a given, that was how it was and I can remember coming as an adult, a young adult, becoming much more aware of it, and just being, looking back and remembering that I'd been taught about South Africa but with no discussion or questioning, it was just that this was how it was. And I still remember that, and to me that's a really shocking way of teaching children and young people about things. I would hope that that would never happen now, I would hope that education has at least got an understanding of politics and that you would never just say 'Well, this is how it is'. But that's how I was taught and so there's nothing different that I would do, I'm glad that I was able to do what little bit of it I did, and glad that we saw the end of apartheid. Obviously South Africa is now dealing with the aftermath of that. There were, I think, some joyful years immediately afterwards and now some difficult times, but I don't think you could ever have wished that you hadn't stood up and done something when you can see that there was an absolutely fundamental injustice and that the only thing that you could regret is not doing anything.

PC: You say that there was opposition to the Movement from people saying, 'Oh, you're supporting people with, you're supporting a group who are blowing up people'. Do you think that because at the time we were in the middle of Cold War type politics that that had an impact in Britain, to say, well they obviously supported the United States in the Cold War but it was the Soviet Union that was giving arms to them. Do you think that was where the opposition came from?

KH: Yes, there'd be an element of that. I think that some of it was just that, it's difficult for any of us. I mean I'm a pacifist by nature and by belief and I would do anything before taking up arms, and I'd like to think that anybody else would. But I think there are situations in which there is no choice, because if you don't do something about it, you just accept that you are going to be, that a whole group of people are going to be ... treated as second class citizens doesn't even go there, it's way worse than that. And I think there comes a point when you have to say, 'Well, I obviously wish there is a way of doing it otherwise, but there is no way people are going to give up that kind of power without somebody doing something to challenge it. So yes, I hadn't really particularly thought about that, but I'm sure there's an element in which there was a feeling that the Soviet Union was supporting the ANC and that therefore, yes, maybe some people thought 'We don't like the Soviet Union so we're on America's side', but I wouldn't have thought that anyway, so for me that wouldn't have been an issue. But yes, I'm sure that was part of the resistance for some people.

JD: Just before, you said you went to South Africa after it all ended. What was it like in the aftermath?

KH: Well, it was remarkably civil and that was what I found most impressive. And I think that was definitely, I think there was such a commitment, particularly from the ANC, to be determined to go forward and not look back, leave the anger behind, leave the injustice behind and actually move on and try and create a new multi-racial equal South Africa. And you felt it, you felt it as you were working with people. It's difficult because there were a lot of people coming into jobs and starting from not having had the experience because of course people hadn't worked in those jobs, they had worked in menial jobs, and then they were coming in and taking on roles they hadn't previously had. But yes, there was a huge feeling of optimism and I couldn't believe how forgiving the black people were, within the government. But then what I also found depressing, although I don't know why I thought it would be any different, that you would get invited to people's houses, because I went as a consultant, a white British consultant, you would get invited round to people's houses and in the comfort of their own homes and where they thought it was safe, people would make really pretty horribly racist comments. And I think I was a bit naive when I first was there and thought, 'Oh yeah, everybody feels the same', but of course there was still a lot of ... the black community, the people that I met, I was amazed at their ability to forgive and move on, but what I found really sad was that, I suppose because the white people felt, certain ones, not all white people at all, many white people were incredibly active in the struggle, but those people who had found apartheid a perfectly comfortable society to live in were not that chuffed that things had changed. And so behind everything, in the corridors of power it was all very civil and you felt as if there was real good work going on, but then when you met people socially things were said that were pretty appalling. So yes, that was difficult, although I should not have been surprised by it. I think I just had this idea that everybody would move on, but clearly people didn't and some people regretted that it had changed.

PC: When you went out to South Africa what did you do while you were there?

KH: Well, I basically worked for the regional government on communications. That's what I do, that's my job, and it was part of the British government funded programme, sort of rebuilding the country. And it was just through that I was asked to go and do a couple of weeks, so I went twice, as I say, and it was really about looking at local government, regional government, you know, democratic communications, that was what I did. I don't know how effective it was, but that's what I went for.

JD: [pause] I think I am out of questions ...

KH: Is that all [*laughter*]? OK, yes, I think it's really important, one of the great things about the AAM was that it brought people from all different walks of life together, and people who shared a commitment to doing something to help the freedom movement in South Africa. So there were church people, there were people who were party politically active, there were people who were engaged for whatever they actually had some connection with South Africa, but it really was a very broad church. And I think that is one of the reasons it was so successful actually, because it managed to bring people together on a single campaigning issue who may well have had huge differences on all sorts of other issues, but this is what we did, we didn't do anything else in the Anti-Apartheid Movement, our job was to work with the South African people to help them achieve equality. And so that, I think that's an important thing, that there were so many different types of people involved in the Movement. Single issue movements do have that advantage, that they can bring people together in a way that maybe parties can't do quite so well because it's a very single focus, and you can

put your differences to one side because you are all collectively committed to the task in hand.

PC: Obviously it was based on politics and things like that, so do you think that because Margaret Thatcher wouldn't bring in sanctions, whereas the United States brought in the Anti-Apartheid Act, do you think her not bringing in these actions, sanctions, slowed the progress down, stopped it from apartheid to be able to ... ?

KH: Yes, definitely, government decisions can have an enormous impact, so yes, absolutely definitely I think that the fact that in the period we are talking about we had a Tory government run by Margaret Thatcher had a big impact on things not changing sooner. But it also ... many of us were also engaged in various struggles against other things, so a lot of people were ... the fact that the Tories were in power and were in there for a very long time, that was, I suppose it was part of it, yes, it was part of it, but definitely, if different decisions had been taken at government level then things could have changed quicker.

PC: Did you find that refugees from South Africa ... did many of them come to Britain, and if they did, did you meet them at all? Were they involved somehow?

KH: Yes, much more so in London, and again there were other people ... I mean certainly whoever is interviewing David, my husband, because he was actively involved in London, he used to work in the Anti-Apartheid Movement offices there and definitely we knew quite a lot of people who basically had to get out because they were in real danger, again a lot of white South Africans. But most of them would be in London and I mean I'm sure people who stayed, I mean a lot of people went back, but people who stayed, probably not necessarily in London now, but generally people would congregate in London, partly because that's where the activism was centred, in a way the Movement was centred, but also I suppose it's the capital, it's a big place and you had a lot more people there. But we knew quite a lot of activists and actually when I went to South Africa one thing that was really nice was there was a couple who we knew called Patti and Theo – I don't know if they were ANC members. I think they were, but they lived two streets from us in London and then we lost touch with them because they had gone back to South Africa we had lost touch with them. Then when I went to South Africa, a friend of mine was working there, so I went to visit him in Johannesburg and it turned out that his partner was best friends with Patti and so we met up again having completely lost touch for must have been 15 years, no 10, 15 years. So I met her and I also met somebody else that I had known in London through that. So it's really strange, I completely lost touch with people and then through a different connection ... but I don't think at the time it seemed like a wonderful and amazing coincidence. But again, a lot of these people had been here because they had to get out of South Africa, because they were in danger and they came here to continue the struggle away from there. And so you don't expect ... but when they returned to their country they would naturally keep in touch with people who had been in a similar situation. But yes, certainly in London there were a lot of people that we knew who were South African. Not so much – I'm trying to think of anyone in Sheffield who was involved who was South African. There probably was, but I can't think of anyone in particular, no I can't think of anybody

PC: You said – going back to some of the people from all different walks of life there, you said you and your husband were in the Anti-Apartheid Movement. Did you find out the Movement was made up of mainly single people or a mix of single people and married?

KH: A mix, a real mix, of single, married, young, old. I mean again, what it was like, it wasn't just ideological or religious differences, but you know you would have pensioners and students working collectively, and again I think that was one of the great things about the Movement that you did have this cross generation, you know cross politics cross religious beliefs, everything, just people coming together to work for a cause and you know that was a real positive thing about the Movement. I think it didn't matter if you were 18, it didn't matter if you were 60, people would get involved and work together. It was quite, it was quite a bringing together of people, so yes, but I'd say again, single, married, pretty much half and half – there were quite a lot of you... I suppose not very often if people are together they are, they don't always share the same politics, but they very often share a similar world view. So if one member of a couple was actively involved in something, then the other member might also feel the same and be actively involved, but again for us it was before we had children, so we were both in the position, that we could do stuff all the time. And certainly later on when we had kids one of us wouldn't, we couldn't both be doing the same thing all the time and it took a lot of time. Every weekend you were out doing stuff and quite a lot of meetings in the week, so probably what you didn't have actually was many young to middle-aged people who basically ... you didn't have as many people who had families, it tended to be young people before family life or people whose kids had grown up, because being politically active and being out there all the time doesn't always fit that well with family life.

JD: Do you know if there was a very big student involvement? Did it affect a lot of universities?

KH: Yes, I mean students were very very engaged, there were a lot of students in the Anti-Apartheid Movement, but also I'm pretty certain both universities would have had their own student Anti-Apartheid Movement as well. Certainly, definitely, I mean somebody who we're still really good friends with, she was involved in the Anti-Apartheid Movement in Sheffield and she was here as a student. But I have a feeling they also had university groups as well and maybe some people were involved in both the city movement and the university group, but other people would have just been involved in the university group. But we certainly had very good links with University of Sheffield. We used to have conferences, we used to have meetings there and stuff, but that might have been partly because Paul worked for the student union, Paul Blomfield, at that time, so it might have been to some extent a coincidence that we had a connection there and we knew how to book rooms there, that kind of thing. So I'm not ... but yes, definitely it was a big student ... a lot of students were involved, in particular Barclays, you know the campaign against Barclays Bank. Students would choose not to have their bank accounts with Barclays. That was the big student campaign actually – 'Don't bank with Barclays', for many years. I mean I remember when I went to university, although I wasn't that involved in Anti-Apartheid then, I certainly wouldn't have opened a bank account with Barclays. That was ... you were basically anywhere on the Left and had any interest whatsoever in ... you just knew you didn't bank with Barclays. It was as simple as that and that was it. It was a very strong campaign and very much student focused because at that time the norm was whoever you started banking with ... you went to university, you got your grant cheque and you don't have those things anymore, but you got a cheque and you went and opened a bank account and pretty much the norm was you stayed with that bank until you died. I mean the way that financial institutions work now and people shift banks and mortgages and stuff is quite a new thing. That was your bank and you stayed there and so banks were very aggressive in their marketing towards students, because there were all sorts of deals on offer, free this, free that, £100 cash-back. But Barclays really struggled with the student market because generally students ... It was a

good campaign and it worked, so students, most students, didn't bank and it was shame involved if people's parents banked with Barclays and they had already got a bank account. You would hide your cheque book, 'I'm sorry oh yeah I know I shouldn't really but I always have' kind of thing, so yes I'd say there was a very strong student engagement.

PC: Such a long struggle – the ANC had a real long struggle in South Africa. There is not a lot taught in schools nowadays about it. Why do you feel that would be?

KH: I don't know, I think it's very disappointing. I don't know why and I'm surprised to hear that. Really I don't know, I'm not a teacher so I have ... well, I am a teacher here [Sheffield Hallam University], but not a teacher in schools. It seems to me that it ought to be taught in schools because you know people need to understand what can happen if [pause], you know, it seems to me it's a lesson of history we should make sure is never repeated. So I'm surprised if it's not, but maybe it's just like I said. I was never really taught about it other than this is just how it is. Maybe it's just ... I don't know, I don't know why and I'm surprised to hear. Is that something you've found out then that it's not really ...

PC: Yes, I was never taught about it and I only found out about it from doing this project that it was ... and things that I had heard of it and I had heard of Nelson Mandela, but we did not really learn about it in school.

JD: We never got the details. It was more a thing very glazed over, like I knew Nelson Mandela had been imprisoned for all of this life and he was very old, and it was just like we just never really ... nobody really explained it.

PC: Yes, like you go into German history and you've got the Nazis and all that, but then you don't hear about like the atrocities in Africa.

KH: Yes, I suppose it's partly because of the Eurocentric nature of our world views to some extent. And just as a country it's sort of like Europe, but yes, I am surprised because it's such a fascinating history as well, so interesting, so I am surprised and disappointed because I thought it would have improved since my time, but clearly not.