

Interview with Jack Jones, former General Secretary of the Transport and General Workers Union, 17 February 2000, reproduced on the Anti-Apartheid Movement Archives Committee Forward to Freedom project website

<http://www.aamarchives.org/>

[On Jack Jones's visit to South Africa in 1973 he asked the authorities for facilities to visit David Kitson, who was serving a 20-year prison sentence.]

Jack Jones: [They said] ... he was a murderer. They wouldn't allow us to see David Kitson. So then I said we would like to see the young man Sean Hosey because of his father and mother, whom I knew, and on humanitarian grounds. And they eventually agreed that we could see him and we went along to Pretoria Jail, Feather and I, and then they eventually brought him in and I'd arranged with Feather, I said 'Now, look, I want to pass a message to young Hosey, to get to Kitson, so if you keep the Governor occupied – he was a real spieler, was Vic Feather – I'll try and get the message for Hosey to deliver – not by hand, but by word – and that's what we did. It worked out fine, in the sense that Hosey did convey the message that we were thinking about him, and fighting for him, and of course for young Hosey. His father was an active member of my union.

Christabel Gurney: I really wanted to start by asking you about what you said on the phone – that the British labour movement's contribution [to anti-apartheid action] wasn't a very heroic one.

JJ: You see, I tend to link the attitudes of a lot of leaders in the TUC and the trade unions to their attitudes towards race and colour because of racial discrimination. They dragged their feet on that for many years. The idea of getting legislation against discrimination was opposed by people like Victor Feather and on the political side by Bob Mellish, very strongly, and equally their attitude towards opposition to apartheid, or even anything very much to do with South Africa, was lukewarm.

CG: Do you think also that there was a problem with the movement not being very internationalist? Was it better on issues like Spain or Chile because of what you were saying?

JJ: In the main the people who were in favour of opposing Franco and company in Spain were the same sort of people who opposed apartheid and the same sort of people who opposed what happened in Chile. In my case I went to Chile and I also went to South Africa, very late in the day of course, with the TUC. But in the case of Chile I went there ... the people who were put in prison and the disappeared ones ... that's a long story. The internationalism of a lot of TUC leaders was worn on their sleeve. However, the issues of apartheid and South Africa were discussed, as you know, more or less each year at the annual Trade Union Congress. I suppose for that period during the whole of the '70s, there was always something that came up. The issue is what did they do, what were they prepared to do, because some of the unions were not discouraging individual members from working in South Africa. Some of us took the view that we should oppose people going out to work in South Africa while the apartheid regime was there, and I must say that the Draughtsmen's

Union was very good. Kitson was a member of DATA. There was always a difficulty about attitudes to the trade union situation out there. SACTU [South African Congress of Trade Unions] was always sort of linked with the Communist Party and so the TUC establishment tended to be doubtful about SACTU, although personally I talked to them.

CG: That's my next question – why was the TUC so loyal to TUCSA, the alternative federation, for so long?

JJ: Yes, they were. I was doubtful and when we went out there, we met TUCSA, you see, and with Feather, that was all we would have done. I said 'Hang on, what about the people who are trying to form black trade unions?', and they [TUCSA] clearly weren't. Don't forget that unions like the Boilermakers and the AEU [Amalgamated Engineering Union] had their counterparts in South Africa. The attitudes in the main of the trade unions in South Africa were very bad indeed. The Boilermakers leader whom I met was a bit better, but he still had black servants who were subject to the pass laws.

CG: Who did you see when you went in 1973? Did you manage to see black trade unionists?

JJ: I did, yes. In the main they were under bans. A few people I saw were only allowed to see one person, so I would go and see them and tell Feather 'You wait and I'll go out and you come in, to prove to him that there was this effort'. Black workers were really fighting a very hard battle. At that time they were trying to form liaison committees, you know, the right to represent workers. There wasn't an organised black trade union movement. I suppose the best element of organisation, although it still had racial bars, was the clothing workers, which had been started by Solly Sachs, who did a lot of good work against apartheid prior to being exiled. I had a lot of contact with Solly Sachs when he was in Britain and he did a lot, but he was isolated and ignored by the TUC. I'd say there was (a) an attitude that South Africa was far off and (b) an attitude that said 'Well, what's wrong, South Africa's quite a nice country'.

CG: The Anti-Apartheid Movement, of course, was asking trade unionists to call for sanctions and the TUC did pay lip-service to that, partly because Congress resolutions went through, but what do you think they really felt?

JJ: Well they took no action about it, really. I raised it in the ITF, the International Transport Workers, about the isolation of South Africa and we passed resolutions, but it was always very difficult to apply sanctions in terms of boycotts. The one reason, although later they changed their tune, the American trade unions didn't regard apartheid in the same way that they regarded some other situations which suited the American administration.

CG: Also in the early years the Anti-Apartheid Movement really believed that it could ask workers not to handle South African goods and of course the people on the front line were the transport workers. Why do you think that never happened?

JJ: Well, the problem there was that the main instrument of trade with South Africa as far as docks were concerned was the Union Castle line and it was the main livelihood of the dockers in Southampton. There was no decision taken to instruct dockworkers. It was always a problem because the Executive could have made a decision and instructed them not to do it, but they would have refused. The main thing was to try to get solidarity feeling that it was wrong.

CG: In the mid '60s the TUC passed a resolution calling on workers to black goods, and Frank Cousins made a contribution at the Congress and said 'Yes, the movement will do that if it's really the wish of the British Labour movement'. But it sounded as if he was covering himself ...

JJ: None of the unions really did a lot, I'm afraid. Of course in the case of the AEU they were going out to South Africa working there, particularly skilled people, and of course they were writing back about how good it was. We had a member of our Executive, a rank and file trade unionist, because our Executive was all rank and file, he went out there and got a job and he wrote back in glowing terms and when he knew I was going out he wrote to me, and I refused to see him. It was very difficult.

CG. Do you remember the Weeks of Action? In 1977 and 1978, there were trade union Weeks of Action that were called by the ICFTU.

JJ: That's correct. And they were backed by the ITF. The ITF did try very hard to back the black trade unions, we raised money for it and so on, and I met them when I went. In the main these were black trade unionists in transport operating from Soweto. We bought a van for them and collected money for them and all that sort of thing. Feather and company were busy looking to see if they could get free cigars from Helen Suzman and they actually negotiated for free suits from a big clothing factory. Vic said 'You'll be alright, you'll get a suit here' – nothing about apartheid. However, in the case of the clothing workers they did have a black section alongside the white section, a woman called Cornelius, followed Sachs, I think. She seemed to be quite progressive. Well I mean I don't know that they were fighting all that strongly. Who was the other women? There was another woman – she was very active. She came back to Britain. This was a white woman, she was quite courageous actually, I think she was in Durban. Anyway I made quite a few contacts with the black trade unions. And there were some courageous white people. There was one Catholic priest who was banned at the same time. He came back to Britain, didn't he? What was his name? Actually his brother was a docker.

CG: Cos Desmond?

JJ: Desmond, yes. He was banned when I was there. They only needed to raise their voice and they were banned.

CG: In one of those Weeks of Action – do you remember Chris Child? – he said that in 1977 the Liverpool dockers shop stewards said that they would black South African goods for the week, and they called a mass meeting and they couldn't carry it.

JJ: As a Liverpool docker I could always get them, by and large, to boycott Chile and things like that, especially if there was individuals involved, you know. They were trying to deport one fellow and we stopped it, that sort of thing, but you've got to carry people with you, and it's very difficult.

CG: So do you think it wasn't just the leadership, there was a problem with mobilising people?

JJ: The leadership themselves, they were not, by and large they were not good in their attitude to discrimination. They didn't fight very hard. People like Hughie [Scanlon, General Secretary of the AEU] and myself and Bob Edwards, a friend of mine, from the Chemical Workers, he was a friend of my youth, he was very good and the Musicians Union, a number of the leaders of smaller unions, but by and large the old guard of the TUC were not good at all, the [name inaudible]s, the Haydays, Feather himself, though later on Feather was prepared to say things that sounded alright. They regarded anybody who was fighting against apartheid, and even against racial discrimination, as Communists, as reds. In the main the people who were doing most of the shouting were – nothing wrong with that. But then they thought, you know, there was something wrong with it.

CG: In the '70s you do have the impression there was the growth of white collar unions, like NALGO, and that they did more. I wonder why that was.

JJ: Well of course NALGO, for some good reasons, a few of the more progressives, I don't mean ultra-progressives, were inclined to want to develop a bit internationally. Don't forget they were not in the TUC then. They set up an international committee or something of the kind, and that did a bit on the humanitarian side. What they did beyond that, I don't know. Even now I don't know. I mean I meet them and they send people all over the world and so on. I never see any of their reports.

CG: In the '80s NALGO and then UNISON, in particular, they sent quite a lot of money, they trained people. Setting up local government structures after the 1994 election was quite difficult and they did help.

JJ: Of course you know, when we went out there, I saw people who were interested in trying to educate black workers into trade unions. I found some of those, including one or two of the priests I think, were very good and we decided at least we could get union money for that sort of thing. I forget what it was called.

CG: The UTP [Urban Training Project]?

JJ: That's right. Their attitude was very good towards black trade unionism, they wanted to help. A lot of people who were assisted at that stage became leaders of the black trade unions, for example the woman who eventually led the engineering union. They weren't necessarily manual workers, but they wanted to organise despite the dangers involved.

CG: Do you think, looking back, that the approach of supporting black trade unions rather than supporting sanctions, was a correct one? The two things were opposed in the '70s.

JJ: From my point of view that was the most effective way we could fight against apartheid. We could demonstrate the unfairness of apartheid. I mean – to tell people when I came back, ‘Look, I went into factories, British-owned factories, and you’d have black toolmakers, skilled men, highly skilled men, working for half the price of whites’. The discrimination was so obvious. And the idea that even the bloody car parks were for whites, Asians, non-whites – I don’t think that extended to black people. If they had a car at all, they had to go in a different entrance to the car park – Leyland, that was. And of course the canteens the same thing, the white workers had a different one, although the food was prepared by black people. But that sort of thing got over to workers here, I mean ordinary workers. You explained that and they saw, you know, the criminal sense of that. I am bound to tell you my attitude to apartheid was dominated for years because my brother was a marine engineer and in the '20s he went to South Africa. He came back telling my father and mother and brothers and me about how black people couldn’t walk on the same pavement as white people. This was in the late '20s – that sort of thing and of course it was maintained and even stronger later.

CG: Why did you personally get involved? You went to Spain, didn't you in the '30s?

JJ: I remember in Liverpool, when I was a young Labour councillor, I was always opposed to things that imposed discrimination, to the way that Indian seamen were treated, Chinese seamen were treated, because as a young man I was working on the docks. I served an apprenticeship in engineering, and I participated in an unofficial organisation of dockers and seamen. We had a dockers and seamen’s club. Bevinⁱⁱ didn’t like it. But I was very active in the union. And we used to help to battle against some of the very harsh treatment to Indians, black workers, Chinese, on the ships. Indians, in particular, they used to get a pound a month, and often the ships didn’t keep any record. If they died on a voyage they were just thrown over, there were no records. And I remember calling and organising meetings as a young Labour man. In Liverpool there were ghettos. You had an African part on the south end, a hostel there, and you had Jewish and Black people in Brownlow Hill, and we had a big Chinatown, the biggest in the country. I went in there, mainly to talk to seamen, and so my internationalism was like that. And I remember calling a meeting. Would you remember the Scottsboro boys? These were young black people in the southern part of the United States, well before Luther King, and they were wrongly charged, a trumped up charge. You know, they were sentenced to death, allegedly for raping a white girl. We organised a big campaign on that. I think they eventually were sentenced to a long term of imprisonment. I think one or two of them were executed. That was not unusual in the United States at that time. So I suppose it grew.

My mother’s first husband died early. And she had nothing. It was either the workhouse or scraping along somehow. A Jewish packman, a fellow who had escaped from Russia – this is well back – he helped her. She opened a little shop, it was not unusual in those days, just two rooms up and two rooms down, and he

supplied her with stuff and he didn't worry about the money for a bit, and she was always very grateful to him, she always mentioned his name. Even later when he died, when I was young and a friend of his had a little shop, she used to go there to buy a toy for one of us and that sort of thing. So it wasn't unusual for me to take an attitude against discrimination.

CG: What did you do in Spain?

JJ: I was wounded very badly in my shoulder. I was the Political Officer in the Major Attlee Company, Commissar they called it, Commissario de Guerra. That didn't mean that you didn't fight. You were expected to be in the lead. Some of the military commanders didn't go to the front, but the commissars were expected to. But I had had military training. I was in the Territorial Army.

CG: Over Spain there was the same ... it was very much a rank and file movement of trade unionists, wasn't it?

JJ: You mean the International Brigade? Yes, the Labour Party ostensibly gave it their blessing. They used to send delegates over there and some of them carried messages. Attlee of course was quite favourable, and he visited there and gave his name to the No. 1 Company of the British Battalion. I eventually became the Commissar of that Company, but I also went out there on a trade union basis. Surprisingly, I took a letter from Ernie Bevin to the trade unions. They didn't like it, but it enabled me to meet them. I also took a letter from the Liverpool Trades Council. The Labour leadership in Liverpool was Catholic, but it was very favourable to the Republic. We sent a lot from Liverpool, there was quite a few men went from Liverpool. About 20 were killed. There's a memorial which I unveiled in Liverpool. We had a lot to do with the Spanish trade unions, then and afterwards. Sometimes it was an unofficial movement among the dockers and seamen ... But the ITF of course did a lot of work. But I say again, the attitude was similar to the attitude towards racial discrimination, I was always impressed by people like Robeson [Paul Robeson] and Learie Constantine, a black man who was accepted, but he never hid his opposition to ideas like apartheid.

I was the first trade unionist on the Racial Discrimination Committee, when they set up a Committee on Commonwealth Immigrants, a national group, when Roy Jenkins was the Home Secretary, and they put the old archbishop, a silly old bugger, I can't remember his name, he was asleep half the time, and I was invited by Harold Wilson, because I was active on the left of the Labour Party then, and the TUC hadn't nominated me. When I was put on the Committee – I wasn't on the General Council [of the TUC] then, I was only an Executive Officer here [at the TGWU] – they protested at the idea. Anyway I think Woodcock persuaded them to nominate someone and said, 'Don't object to Jack being there'. Wilson wouldn't have allowed them on otherwise. The TUC put George Smith on it – the Carpenters Union – not very favourable, although he'd been quite left in his time, many years before. In general of course there wasn't much internationalism among British workers – you know that?

CG: Why do you think that was?

JJ: The main reason – until very recently they couldn't cope with being in Europe! I mean it's easy to arouse – this business of the Froggies and the Germans ... It's getting less so now. People of your age appreciate that. British workers were very introspective.

CG: There's a good book about the Windrush – the people who came on the Empire Windrush – and some of those say they were very surprised when they got here that people didn't know where the Caribbean was. People thought they came from Africa.

JJ: That's right. Well, I'm afraid when you get outside of London and the big towns, you hardly see a black person. Surprisingly, when I went to the Shetlands once, to see – we had members there, but I also went up to see a development, a new oil installation, and I met our people there. But when I was walking round there was an Indian and I think somewhere else I saw a Chinese, but you didn't see any black people. So that it's like a new world to them, it's not easy, unless they're taught in schools, and then they mix. My family, I'm pleased to say, are very internationalist.

ⁱ Vic Feather was General Secretary of the TUC.
ⁱⁱ Ernest Bevin, General Secretary of the TGWU