Apartheid on Trial

On June 28, 1986, sixteen days after the South African government declared a State of Emergency, black autoworker Moses Mayekiso was detained by security forces. He has remained in prison since that time, along with thousands of other anti-apartheid activists rounded up under martial law.

Unlike most detainees, however, Moses Mayekiso was eventually charged with a crime. The charge is treason. The trial, begun in October, will resume February 1 and the whole world will be watching.

What is exceptional about the Mayekiso case? Moses Mayekiso is the secretary general of the newly merged National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), representing 130,000 workers in auto and other metal trades. NUMSA is an affiliate of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), the leading labor federation which Brother Mayekiso helped to found in 1985.

At the time of his arrest, Brother Mayekiso was returning from a union solidarity meeting in Sweden. His 163-page indictment includes additional charges based on his activities in Britain raising support for the bitter South African metalworkers strike against the British conglomerate BTR at its Sarmcol plant (see page 4).

Moses Mayekiso is also a community activist in the Alexandra Township, near Johannesburg, where he lives with his wife and seven children and where he chaired the Alexandra Action Committee. Over the past two years, Alexandra residents have organized rent and consumer boycotts to protest government policies. These actions forced a large group of black security police to leave the township.

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The South African government claims that these organizing activities constitute an attempt to overthrow the government. Along with Mayekiso, Pretoria has brought treason charges against his brother Mzwanele and community leaders Paul Tahabala, Richard Mdakane, and Obed Bapela.

The real issues of the trial are twofold. First, the Botha regime would like a conspicuous precedent for legally crushing all forms of independent organizing and self-governance in the black townships, which have been the flash points for anti-apartheid mobilizations since 1984.

Secondly, Moses Mayekiso is a powerful and personal symbol of how militant trade unionism is generating new layers of leadership and organization in the anti-apartheid movement in both the community and workplace arenas.

Brother Mayekiso has been jailed several times before. In his last arrest, he was tortured, placed in solitary confinement and held for 10 months before charges were brought. The persecution of Moses Mayekiso is intended as a warning to COSATU leaders to curtail labor's growing involvement in the political struggle.

Pretoria's trial is inspiring more outrage than fear; however. NUMSA and the International Metalworkers' Federation (IMF) have called for worldwide protest of the trial. In the US, the United Auto Workers has spearheaded a "Justice for Mayekiso Campaign." The UAW is sending a delegation of 10 American jurists to observe the trial and has also launched a postcard campaign. Rallies have been held by unionists in San Francisco, Detroit and Chicago.

The stakes of the trial are high. The defense of Moses Mayekiso is more than the defense of a courageous man. It is the defense of thousands of South African union activists, already jailed and yet to be jailed, who claim that all human rights are labor rights.

In New York City, a Free Mayekiso Rally will be held in February or early March when the trial is underway. Contact LCAA coordinator Vicki Williams at (212) 242-0700 or UAW Local 259, Miriam Thompson, at (212) 966-1920, for the latest information.

To obtain Justice for Mayekiso materials and postcards, contact the UAW Government and International Affairs Department, 1757 N St. NW, Washington DC 20036. Protest letters can also be sent directly to Ambassador Dr. Pieter G.J. Koornhof, Embassy of South Africa, 3051 Mass. Ave. NW, Washington DC 20008.
South African Labor Stands Up

1987 was a year of confrontation and maturation for the South African labor movement. The most dramatic moment belonged to the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), which in August led 350,000 miners out of the shafts on a 21-day strike against South Africa's most powerful employers.

The strike ended in a draw. The union surprised the South African Chamber of Mines with its breadth and depth of organizing. The strike idled more than half the mine workforce, shut down 44 gold and coal mines, and dug deeply into mine owners' profits.

Industry representatives acknowledged that they didn't expect NUM to be able to hold its members out for more than two or three days. The strike's three week duration and disciplined return to work prompted the Chamber's president, Naas Steenkamp, to comment: "Employers have learned that the union has muscle, organization, capacity, determination and skill."

NUM was not, however, able to win its basic demand of a 30% wage increase and settled at management's unilateral offer of 15-23% increases. South African black miners now earn an average $285 a month, plus lodging in worksite barracks or 'hostels.' This is one-fifth of what white miners earn.

The end came after 40,000 striking miners were dismissed by mineowners, who also closed two marginal mines. NUM leaders recognized that the Chamber was prepared to escalate the mass firings, which could have seriously depleted and divided union ranks and set back the strike's organizing gains.

And of course, South Africa's police state stood in the wings ready to enforce the firings. The strike toll had already mounted to nine deaths, 500 injuries and 400 arrests of black miners.

Several labor observers in South Africa commented that the strike has stripped the liberal veneer from the employers like mining giant Anglo-American, which has professed a dis-
COSATU also demonstrated impressive solidarity among other COSATU unions, the United Democratic Front, and numerous community organizations.

South Africa's second largest union was formed in June with the merger of eight COSATU affiliates into the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA). NUMSA promptly launched its own living wage campaign, which produced rapid membership growth. On July 14, 50,000 metalworkers staged a one-day walkout to dramatize their wage demands.

NUMSA was put to the test in August by a nine-week strike against the Mercedes Benz plant in East London, where 2,800 black workers won a minimum wage of 4.50 rand (up from R3.50), the reinstatement of all striking workers, and a reduction of the work week to 40 hours without loss in pay. It was an important victory for NUMSA, breaking the industry pattern and setting new standards in auto.

Perhaps the most poignant loss of 1987 was the official end of the SARMCOL workers' two year strike against the British multinational BTR. Over 800 workers at the SARMCOL plant were dismissed in May 1985 for participating in a legal strike. They continued the strike and appealed to the Industrial Court.

With the help of their union, the Metal and Allied Workers Union (now in NUMSA), the workers also set up several producer cooperatives to sustain their families and produced a play of the strike, "The Long March." The play has toured South Africa and Britain.

These efforts were rebuked in September, after a year of hearings, when the Industrial Court found there were no grounds for ordering the strikers' reinstatement. Moreover, the Court declared that the kind of "collective democracy practiced by the union" should not be "tolerated" in South Africa.

The Court went on to recognize UWUSA as the new representative of the scab workers in the SARMCOL plant. According to COSATU affidavits, INKATHA has also been implicated in the vigilante killing of a SARMCOL strike leader, Simon Ngubane, and other organized violence against strike supporters.

The Court's ruling against NUMSA is grim both for legal labor relations in South Africa and for the fired SARMCOL workers, 200 of whom now face eviction from company-owned hostels in addition to continuing unemployment. But the SARMCOL strike remains a symbol of resistance and solidarity. As the Weekly Mail put it: "The longest labor dispute is over. But the dust it kicked up won't blow away."

COSATU Supports Divestment

At COSATU's annual convention in July, 15,000 delegates voted to endorse "total and mandatory sanctions" against foreign loans to the South African government and businesses. The federation also gave full support to divestment by foreign companies still operating in South Africa.

COSATU general secretary Jay Nai---
"One industry, one union" was the founding call of COSATU, South Africa’s largest labor federation. To achieve this goal, COSATU has been carefully nurturing the merger of multiple unions within each industry.

Three newly merged affiliates include the South African Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU), the Paper, Print, Wood and Allied Workers Union (PPWAWU), and the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union of South Africa (ACTWUSA). With 35,000 members, ACTWUSA becomes the third largest union in South Africa, after the miners (NUM) and metalworkers (NUMSA).

It’s no coincidence that the new textile union’s name so closely matches the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU) of the US and Canada. ACTWU was one of the first American unions to actively join the anti-apartheid struggle and to directly aid its union counterparts in South Africa. ACTWU has sponsored exchange visits by union leaders and has played a leading role in advancing AFL-CIO and international labor action against apartheid.

This Fall, ACTWUSA returned ACTWU solidarity in full measure when ACTWU found itself in a tough battle to gain union recognition at the Martin Processing Co. in Martinsville, Virginia. The plant is a subsidiary of Courtaulds, a London-based multinational with textile plants in Canada, the UK, and in Durban, South Africa.

ACTWU called on its sister unions abroad for help in pressuring Courtaulds to stop its union-busting tactics in Martinsville, which had threatened union activists and hired notorious anti-labor law firm. ACTWUSA responded forcefully, as general secretary John Copelyn wrote to ACTWU:

“We have sent a letter protesting Courtaulds’ conduct…. Our shop stewards are demanding the right to phone ACTWU on 17 December from the plant to get results of the election [in Martinsville]. Should the company succeed at breaking the attempt at recognition, our members here have stated that they are ready to join ACTWU in whatever stoppage or further protest is called.

“In the interim, workers have implemented a complete overtime ban in both plants in protest against Courtaulds’ refusal to insist across its group that fair labor practices, including the recognition of unions, be applied.” Reportedly, ACTWUSA also inquired of the company whether it was complying with the Sullivan Principles – in the United States.

Unfortunately, the union election at the Martinsville plant was lost in December. But closer ties between the textile unions were gained in the process and will continue to develop as ACTWUSA grows.

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John Glaesel, President, Local 602, American Federation of Musicians
William Nuchow, Secretary-Treasurer, Local 840, Intl Brotherhood of Teamsters
Jan Pierce, Vice-President, District 1, Communication Workers of America
Bettye Roberts, President, District Council 70, AFSCME
Cleveland Robinson, Secretary-Treasurer, District 86, United Auto Workers
Edgar Rommey, Manager, Local 23-25, Intl Ladies Garment Workers Union
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Cleveland Robinson, Secretary-Treasurer, District 86, United Auto Workers
Edgar Rommey, Manager, Local 23-25, Intl Ladies Garment Workers Union
Janet Friedman, President, Committee of Interns and Residents
Joe McMillion, President, Metro Area Postal Workers Union, APWU
Sam Meyers, President, Local 258, United Auto Workers
Henry Nicholas, President, Natl Union of Hospital & Health Care Employees

Please contact us if you are interested in subscribing to Labor Against Apartheid, obtaining bulk orders for your union, or receiving notices of upcoming events or meetings.

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Shell Update

In 1987, the boycott of Shell Oil/Royal Dutch Petroleum spread to twelve countries and Shell started to get worried. So rather than give up its $450 million operations as apartheid’s leading oil supplier, Shell hired a boycott-busting consulting firm, Pagan International.

Pagan’s past clients have included Nestle, Campbell Soup and Union Carbide, and its contacts reach deep into the State Department. Its plan, the “Neptune Strategy,” called for special meetings and prestigious forums to discuss the nature of a “post-apartheid society.” The aim was to convince prominent church, civil rights and academic leaders that Shell’s presence in South Africa is essential to training black managers and technicians for the future (regardless of the present).

But it seems Neptune’s messengers at these distinguished gatherings failed to disclose that they were in the pay of Shell Oil. When the word got around, the church and civic leaders were generally outraged and have redoubled their pressure on Shell to pull out. Looks like Neptune got caught in his own net.

Petroleum Sanctions Bill

H.R. 3317 is the Anti-Apartheid Petroleum Sanctions Act, introduced to the House by Robert Wise (D-WVA) and 25 co-sponsors. It prohibits both oil exports to South Africa and investments in any oil company doing business in South Africa, foreign or domestic. Penalties include both fines and the withholding of US government oil leases and permits.

This bill supplements pending legislation to strengthen US sanctions against trade with South Africa, the Dellums/Cranston bill (HR-1580 and S-556). Dellums/Cranston does not apply sanctions to foreign multinationals that have large US operations, such as Shell. The public is urged to put pressure on their representatives to sponsor both HR-3317 and HR-1580/S-556.

RESOURCES

For further information and materials:

SHELL BOYCOTT
c/o United Mineworkers of America
900 15th Street NW
Washington DC 20005
(202) 842-7364

imMOBILize APARTHEID
c/o Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility
475 Riverside Drive, Room 566
New York, NY 10114
(212) 870-2928

With over 28,500 detained in 1987, a little turbulence?

"We haven’t cleared the turbulence yet... Keep your safety belts fastened!"
Cartoon from Die Burger, a major Afrikaans-language newspaper