

Learning to See in New Ways

By Pritz Dullay

Although we had come from the most racialized country in the world and perhaps one of the most conservative, we arrived with open minds, prepared to teach and equally, to learn. Having recognized so early in our exile that there were many cultures out there and each within its own ethnocentric framework, making each unique, we were open to new influences and to new ways of thinking. Believe me, this did not come easily. We often sat with groups of people, many of whom became wonderful friends, and discussed through the night over many cups of herbal tea and coffee and sometimes, good Danish beer. Beer and alcohol in general were exorbitantly expensive in Scandinavia, so this was a rarity. It was not uncommon that discussions lasted through the night and people were still locked in discussion around breakfast! These were open and healthy debates, without anyone putting down another, even if the consciousness of the other was not on par. It was considered a matter of Left etiquette, never to “put anybody down”. Sometimes these discussions involved exchange students who had arrived from South Africa, especially from the University of Natal, Medical School. One of those youngsters stands out quite distinctly as being prepared to learn and take back this information to South Africa. He was a young, impressionably receptive Barry Kistnasamy, who eventually became a Professor of Medicine and Dean of the same Medical School. Discussions revolved around Apartheid, cultural imperialism, racism, sexism, Eurocentrism, Marxism, Communism, American- style imperialism and the whole gamut of left discourses. Again, I need to stress that coming from conservative South Africa, all of this was heady stuff and exhilarating. We absorbed new thinking and often challenged urban myths and legends, sometimes held by some of the most progressive individuals. Often their history of Africa was distorted and based on popular media perceptions, rather than research. We challenged this mindset and slowly won over a great number of “converts”, some of whom joined the Danish Anti-Apartheid Movement or one of the many solidarity movements in support of the then revolutionary struggles in Namibia, Zimbabwe,

Grenada, El Salvador, Chile, Nicaragua, Argentina and Palestine. From these discussions we learnt that the struggle in South Africa was not a struggle in isolation, but part of a global struggle of a great many countries to free themselves from oppression and that the enemy was a common one: those who sought to gain from the resources of those countries considered to be ripe for exploitation and not strong enough to defend themselves. In essence it was the strong and the rich stealing from the poor!

Shortly after our arrival in Denmark, we noticed that little was happening on the Anti-Apartheid front. The South Africa Committee in Aarhus (SAC) had one South African involved with a small group of Danes. There was little mass mobilization; nothing like we had expected. We tried hard to hide our disappointment. Later, we realized that membership relied on representation of the larger national Danish political formations, trade unions and civil society organisations, and that the “accepted” groups were hostile to the membership and participation of the representatives of the Danish Communist Party and the Danish Communist Youth. In essence, even in solidarity work, the cold war division of the world into communists and the West persisted. From the outset, it is important for me to state that over all the years of the Anti-Apartheid Movement, communists played a very significant role and made sacrifices completely out of proportion to their small numbers. Their dedication and willingness to work hard was unquestionable.

It was this low Anti-Apartheid profile that spurred us into action. This was why we had fled South Africa: to mobilize international solidarity and active support against Apartheid. Disappointed with the talk shop activity and a lack of action, we banded together our new friends and started the African National Congress Solidarity Committee, with the objective of mobilization of the broader Danish public in anti-apartheid work. This committee lasted just a few months. Meetings with an ANC representative sent from London, resulted in our voluntarily disbanding the solidarity committee and joining the officially recognised Committee, the SAC, to seriously jack up solidarity actions. We did so as individual members. It was this injection of new blood into the SAC that resulted in sustained and purposeful activity through many years. Eventually the Anti-Apartheid

Movement became the most powerful of the solidarity movements in Denmark and even became a household name. It also achieved international renown as the strongest of the European movements. People such as Erik Tang, Fritz Harders, Lisbeth Moerup, Mads, Torben, Bent, Pernille, Ines Christensen, Tina Jakobsen, Ejinar Sondergaard, Lone and Ketil, Kirsten Prior and Godfrey Beck made up the backbone of the SAC. I worked tirelessly, fired by passion to do whatever it took to liberate my country. In the years of activism, I presented thousands of lectures on the struggle against Apartheid all over Denmark. It was largely the funds generated by my lectures that sustained the SAC in Aarhus. I translated into Danish fourteen of the huge International Defence and Aid Fund Anti-Apartheid exhibitions that toured the country over many years. That was a mammoth task. My art skills were usefully employed in the service of solidarity work! I wrote a great many articles for newspapers, journals and pamphlets. I was regularly interviewed on Danish Radio and on television. My life revolved around our total commitment to mobilize international solidarity against the beast of Apartheid. This meant getting information to the world on what was really happening in the belly of the beast. All of this required much time and effort. Mala played a critically important role in creating the space for me to be an almost full-time activist. In as much as we shared domestic responsibilities and the nurturing of the girls, it has to be made explicit that it was her amazing capacity for constructive work, of whatever nature, in keeping the family together, that I remain eternally grateful for. She participated in every one of the Summer solidarity festivals, May Day rallies, direct street action and solidarity fundraising events. Often she would be the chief cook and marshal the support of activists in food preparation that was sold to raise funds for Anti-Apartheid activity.

Successive South African governments spent millions on propaganda work and had extensive networks with European and American-Canadian far right forces. Many Western governments made grandiose public statements against apartheid but were in collaboration with the racists! We did not have the millions but we occupied the moral high ground and the support of ordinary people across the world. The United Nations Centre Against Apartheid has voluminous records of the West's collaboration with the Apartheid state in financial loans, oil, arms, nuclear technology and conventional arms.

There is also the matter of the thousands of Western businesses who were established in South Africa. At one point in the 1980s it was established that over 40% of those serving in the South African Defence Force were European or British passport holders! The most open support for the Apartheid government came during the era of the USA's Ronald Regan and Britain's Margaret Thatcher. Both branded the ANC and SWAPO as terrorist organisations and Nelson Mandela as a terrorist! It was no surprise that Apartheid South Africa bestowed its highest honour on the reactionary Thatcher. Her acceptance of the racist "honour" placed her among the most reactionary leaders of the so-called "Free World".

Through many years the Copenhagen based National Committee Against Apartheid existed just in name, its actions were symbolic rather than having any substance. It was kept alive by the Communist Party representatives and ironically, their presence kept away representatives from other political formations. This slowly changed but it took years of hard work and the active participation of South Africans such as John Hansen, Barry and Michelle Levenrad and Joe Shubert. Danish activists such as Patrick Mc Manus and Morten Nielsen worked passionately and consistently. Some of the campaigns and events such as the massive 1986 Rock Against Apartheid were just short of spectacular.

Slowly and with a huge input we were able to turn the Danish Anti-Apartheid Movement into a force to be reckoned. My task was to expand Anti-Apartheid Committees to every major town in mainland Jutland and on the island of Fyn, the birth place of HC Andersen, the famous Danish writer of children's stories. Committees were established in Aalborg, Horsens, Randers, Vejile, Esbjerg and Odense. I used to be away from home for weeks at a time, traveling from town to town, addressing a variety of groups and, where possible, setting up Anti-Apartheid Committees, some that had a membership of just a few persons and others that were larger, organization-based groups. My lectures to senior high school and university students became the catalyst that drew the youth into active Anti-Apartheid work in the newly established committees.

Many of our early campaigns involved direct street level interactions with Danes that sought to raise consciousness about the reality in Apartheid South Africa and the need to boycott South African fresh produce, wines, canned goods, gold Kruger Rands and coal. At the same time we secured the support of progressive unions and other groupings to pressure 'Folketinget' (Parliament) to impose blanket sanctions. Some street actions in the busiest pedestrian-only streets used to be mounted daily for eight weeks in a stretch. Often this used to be in the heart of freezing winters. Even though we were well covered against the bone chilling cold of up to minus fifteen degrees, it was not possible to stand in the open street for more than thirty minutes. At about that time the toes and finger would begin tingling with the cold. A hot coffee break of some frighteningly strong, black Danish coffee and buttered rolls slowly spread its warmth and stopped the teeth from chattering! Then it would be back in the street for another stint.

A close South African comrade, Teddy Phillips, who was also based in Aarhus, carried out sterling work in the Namibia Committee. The municipality made available an abandoned factory site where Teddy, Carsten Nielsen and a group of volunteers collected massive quantities of used clothing and had these compressed and containerized to be shipped off to Angola, where the South West African Peoples Organisation (SWAPO) had refugee camps. The Committee's second hand clothing store in the city provided a part of the funds necessary for shipment. This kind of practical solidarity work was as equally important as political solidarity work in pursuing the struggle against the common Apartheid enemy. Tribute must be paid to Teddy Phillips for persevering over twelve years, sometimes in the face of adversity, for performing a largely thankless job. I remember the Summer work camps that used to be organised by the Committee. Youth from all over the world used to meet over a five week period to assist the Committee and to participate in political discussions that served to raise consciousness. In as much as we taught the youngsters, who were in the mid twenties, new ways of understanding, we also learnt a great deal about their countries. Sitting around a camp fire and telling our stories late into the summer night had made for bridge building between diverse youngsters. We were a mini United Nations, building bridges of understanding and compassion to make the world a better place. Many life-long friendships were born at these work camps.

In 1986 I contributed to a book called "Refugee Lives". Danish state television producer, Annette Breuning called to say that she had read a pre-release media copy and wanted to make a 40 minute documentary on my life. As I was busy with a Masters study in English Literature at university, I asked her to call me in nine months, secretly hoping that she would forget. Nine months later, to the day, she called and asked when she could start filming! For the next nine months the whole film crew followed me around, filming my lectures to university gatherings, at Anti-Apartheid Committee meetings, while we carried out street information work on Sharpeville Day and even in our home and garden. She was gently but firmly persuasive and knew precisely the effect she wanted. The end result was a documentary of a family in struggle against Apartheid that drew mass attention when it was screened nationally in February 1988. In June of the same year it was beamed all over Europe. It elicited much support for sanctions against South Africa and for the Anti-Apartheid struggle. It also resulted in the Apartheid South African Consulate in Copenhagen and its Danish supporters carrying out a smear campaign against me, which boomeranged and exposed the role played by the official South African presence in Denmark.

That was followed by the third assassination attempt on my life, when my car was sabotaged, in the hope that I would be killed in the ensuing accident. As my guardian angel would have it, the front right hand tyre of my car burst after a two hour journey into Germany and just after we had pulled into a garage. The German mechanics had little doubt that the marks on the inner wall of the tyre, showed distinct signs of being tampered, possibly with a dagger or other sharp object.

It would seem that as much as the Apartheid forces wanted me dead, God was not yet ready to receive me! We were the living testimony of what Apartheid had done and even worse, of what was being done to our people at home.