Johan Peanberg

Swedish Municipal Worker’s Union

Peanberg started his political involvement as the International Secretary of SSU, the Swedish Social Democratic Youth, 1971-1973. Became General Secretary of the International Union of Social Democratic Youth, IUSSP, with its headquarters in Vienna, 1973–75. Got in contact with the anti-apartheid movement during his years as a law student at the university in Lund. At the time when these things happened there were two main political events in which there was a strong protest movement in Sweden. On the one hand was the Vietnam War, and on the other was the struggle of the anti-apartheid movement. They were actually intertwined, there were direct connections. Peanberg visited Tanzania as part of a delegation from SUL, the Swedish Youth Council. He met with the liberation movements in Dar es Salaam, and was very much impressed by Amilcar Cabral of PAIGC, whom he considered a poet. Peanberg later became the educational officer of the Social Democratic Women’s Organisation and after that the International Secretary for Kommunal Arbetareförbund, the Swedish Municipal Workers’ Union, a position he held for 30 years. Continuously working for women’s rights, Peanberg was part of the initial build-up of the Nordic Solidarity Fund and had contacts with SAMWU, the South African Municipal Workers Union, SACTU and COSATU. The latter became a close collaborator that received supported in the initial struggles and work.

Madi Gray: This is an interview with Johan Peanberg, retired International Secretary of the Swedish Municipal Workers Union. It is 9 August, 2005, South African Women’s Day. Tell me, Johan, how did you become involved in the struggle of the people of Southern Africa for liberation?

Johan Peanberg: At the time I was International Secretary of SSU, the Swedish Social Democratic Youth, from around 1971 till about 1973. After that, from 1973 to 75, I was General Secretary of the International Union of Social Democratic Youth, IUSSP, with its headquarters in Vienna. Then I came to Stockholm.

My first contact with Southern Africa was after my studies. I was living in Lund. I studied law at the University of Lund, but was never active politically in the general student movement because I had already joined the Social Democratic Youth in younger years. People from the liberation movements visited Lund and some studied at the university.

Madi Gray: Was that important in your life?

Johan Peanberg: Absolutely. At the time when these things happened there were two main political events in which there was a strong engagement. On the one hand the Vietnam War, and on the other the struggle of the anti-apartheid movement. They were actually intertwined, there were direct connections, so when we had meetings on one or the other, during
discussions we would bring up issues from the other. If we discussed the situation in Southern Africa, the questions would be directly related to who is to blame, why it is happening, and who is involved, so you could say that early on we had an understanding of the globalisation of the world. The questions of North American and Western involvement were the issues.

Madi Gray: What happened when you left Lund?

Johan Peanberg: I visited Tanzania before coming to Stockholm. I was there as part of a delegation from SUL, the Swedish Youth Council. In Tanzania we met the liberation movements in Dar es Salaam, which was a way for us to stay informed and show solidarity.

Madi Gray: Did you meet representatives of several liberation movements in Dar es Salaam? At that time quite a number had offices there.

Johan Peanberg: Yes, I did. I had good relationships with some of them so I got quite a full picture.
Then after having left Sweden, I was General Secretary of the International Union of Socialist Youth (IUSSP) for a congress period. The struggle in Southern Africa became one of the main themes in our organization and we got support from our members.
When I arrived in Stockholm in the mid-1970s I had an advantage because at the time the Social Democratic Party had relations with many of the authentic liberation movements that Sweden had supported from the early 1960s. Quite early in my work I had opportunities to meet representatives of the different liberation movements, PAIGC from Guinea Bissau, MPLA from Angola, Frelimo from Mozambique. We also had relationships with the ANC of South Africa and I remember we originally had relationships with both ZAPU and ZANU in Zimbabwe.
The more information we got, the more we gained understanding and knowledge. We also had a chance to meet the leaders because they were guests at the Social Democratic Party Conferences. We had what we called political information for SSU, and I wrote an analysis on South Africa during that period. I haven't seen it since, but I do remember it now when we speak about it.
It is also important that it was at the time that Pierre Schori was in the leadership of the Social Democratic Party, that the party established relationships with Southern African trade unions, what I would call the authentic trade unions, or the truly independent trade unions. I would say that during the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s solid relationships were built with the women’s and youth organizations of the liberation movements that I mentioned. We established these contacts and during the years that I was there we had solidarity campaigns for them, we collected money for them and ran articles on them.

Madi Gray: Tell me about that.
Johan Peanberg: We had good relationships with the representatives who were in Stockholm. I remember some of the people who came, the leaders. I was very much impressed by Amilcar Cabral of PAIGC. He was a poet. On the one hand he was a very committed man, but, in my view, also a very analytical man, a very brave man. They were all brave.

What impressed me a lot when we met people from either the liberation movement or the trade union movement was the quality of the people, despite the difficulties, despite the hard times, that they were courageous human beings. You could see that these people had qualities in their way of thinking, which to me personally meant a lot, it probably impressed me very much because they had to fight to get to the leadership of a trade union or a political party. They had to deal with so many things.

There were also some setbacks or some surprises. I mean one or two things made us think when we found out that one of these people who we thought was actually of the highest quality was a crook, or became a multi-millionaire, or did other things, but there are always exceptions to the rules.

Madi Gray: Yes.

Johan Peanberg: I was impressed by what I had read about Nelson Mandela. I hadn't met him at the time because he was in prison, but I remember many of us thought how fantastic it was to have this man, because we got reports more or less regularly of his continuous battle, despite the fact that he was in prison. We heard through different people what was happening.

At the same time, what happened on the political scene was that the war in Vietnam intensified, so we drew more and more attention to it through mass demonstrations. In no way did it change the fact that whenever a liberation movement had representatives in Stockholm and held a meeting, we would be there. We would be informed, we met them regularly, so in a way you could say that the question of Southern Africa was on the agenda, as you had the overwhelming majority of the political youth organizations supporting the liberation movements and the struggle against apartheid. The involvement was not the same for all of them but there was definitely common ground.

Madi Gray: What were important contacts in your life?

Johan Peanberg: We all had a relationship with Sally Mugabe, Robert Mugabe's first wife. Sally was here and I met her and travelled round Sweden with her because we asked for support to get medical equipment or beds, things we could no longer use in the Swedish hospitals.

Madi Gray: Was it in Lund that you started this work or was it here in Stockholm?
Johan Peanberg: I think we did this in Lund. Others had started this collection.

Madi Gray: I remember that a lot of medical supplies were collected in Lund. It had a very active medical group.
You were talking about the time you met Sally Mugabe. Was her visit when you were in Lund or when you were here in Stockholm?

Johan Peanberg: It was here in Stockholm. To me solidarity was a question of support to the liberation movement and of solidarity work with youth. It was basically just to share solidarity with people who were in difficulties.
I also thought that the Swedish Government of the time was quite smart when they began their political support, what they called Humanitarian Support. I think many people on the left were critical, saying, “You're not really showing solidarity with those people, why don't you send them arms?” But in my view this was done in a politically very wise way. On the whole, I must say that not to make party politics out of the struggle for support for the anti-apartheid movements was in my view a very wise way of dealing with this. There was lots of money coming in. Someone who played a key role was the writer Per Wästberg. He had a role in the International Defence and Aid Fund and he was very good.
There were sometimes also, if not tragedies, at least serious mistakes, like when the South African Security Police managed to infiltrate some organizations and get at the money. I remember the IUEF in Geneva where Sweden and other countries put money in, being infiltrated by Special Branch agent Craig Williamson.

Madi Gray: It was around 1980 that it became clear what had happened in the International University Exchange Fund in Geneva.

Johan Peanberg: Yes, though I thought it was earlier. I'm sorry, I'm very bad about the years because I don't care about years, but I do care about events, what actually did happen. One should do both.

Madi Gray: Well if we get the flow of events more or less right then that's fine, that's why I ask you sometimes.
When you were in Lund, did you meet any South African or Namibian students; do you remember any of their names?

Johan Peanberg: Yes I met people in Lund.

Madi Gray: Billy Modise of the ANC in South Africa studied there, did you meet him? Or were he and Yolisa not there at the same time as you?
Johan Peanberg: I wasn't there exactly at the same time, though I know Billy was there. I lived centrally in Lund and had two older sisters, which meant that I was always well-informed about what happened.

I did not meet Billy in Lund, but I met him many times in Stockholm, though I did meet university students and also representatives who came to Lund only for a short time. You know there would be these solidarity meetings, but I can't remember many names. I do remember specifically there was a woman who was extremely bright, from Namibia, Ottillié Abrahams.

Madi Gray: Did you have any personal relationships in Stockholm?

Johan Peanberg: A friend of mine Claude Chokwenda was the ZANU representative in Stockholm. He was a young university student, quite open-minded. Maybe from this point of view we also had a good relationship with the ZAPU youth, but gradually I started to see the difference between the two organizations, and I got better informed. Maybe you remember that ZAPU's leader Joshua Nkomo took money from large multi-national corporations like LONRHO and was friends with Tiny Rowland. I actually wrote about it. From Namibia, I had a great friend here in Stockholm, Ben Amathila, and his wife Libertina.

Madi Gray: Let's go back.

Johan Peanberg: I returned from Vienna around 1975, and was out of work for a short while and then I became the educational officer of the Social Democratic Women's Organisation. The woman holding the post married, so they didn't have anybody to run education, so, for a short while, about three or four months, I was working there. I remember we organized an international seminar for their congress, which I was responsible for, and we had representatives from the ANC, because they have always had good relations with South African women. After that I became the International Secretary for Kommunal Arbetarförbund, the Swedish Municipal Workers' Union.

Madi Gray: What did you do to make you suitable for this job?

Johan Peanberg: While I was studying I worked as a harbourman in Malmö and in Lund in a municipal hospital laundry washing the linen. I did it because I needed to make money to be able to study. I started this kind of work in Stockholm again, but if you ask me it would be more correct to say that it is because I have a Bachelor of Law degree. I was asked to start at the Municipal Workers’ Union by the secretary or the president of the union who called me and asked me to come in to meet him. He offered me the job but I said no because I thought it should be a woman, as I knew that 78% of the members were women, and I thought it was more proper to have a woman. But he asked me to consider it so I said okay, I could stay for a year or two, I thought it would give me something to do. I stayed
almost 30 years.
In the last seven, eight years I have been based at the office but I have been General Secretary of the Nordic Public Services Union. Anyway, when I came there they didn't have any international department, that was the kind of thing that I liked, so I said I would build it up. I started to work for Kommunal that at that time was a union with good relationships with many trade unions and also some good political connections.
At the same time I became Secretary to the Nordic Municipal Workers Union, that's the Municipal Workers in Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Finland. After a few years three of them became the biggest unions in each country, Denmark was an exception.
After a few years, we built a Nordic Solidarity Fund with money from members, and we started to support political movements, resistance movements, and trade union movements, in different parts of the world. I don't know how much of this is public knowledge, and I'm not sure that I've ever gone out and said that we've done these things. But the Chair of the Danish Union was a very committed man and pretty soon I remember that we had meetings with a South African trade union and South African liberation movements. I know that at one of our congresses when we knew that changes were coming we ordered badges saying “Free Mandela” and we held a terrific rally at Sergels Torg in the heart of Stockholm. When congress ended for the day everybody went along. We had a lot of people out. When it comes to Southern Africa we were quite involved. It was the year we understood that change would happen. We were a little bit ahead of events. We were the only union at the time. We tried to get support from other unions, but it wasn't so easy. We were a bit ahead of events.

Madi Gray: That was in the late 1980s? What else did you do?

Johan Peanberg: In November 1989 I was in Zimbabwe at a congress in Harare when the Berlin Wall was breached. I remember because this was not on the news in Harare so I looked at the Internet and saw it there.

Madi Gray: Soon afterwards apartheid collapsed. On 2 February 1990, there was a delegation of ANC leaders in Stockholm most of whom had been released by President De Klerk in October 1989. It included Goven Mbeki and Andrew Mlangeni and six others who had been involved in the Rivonia trial. They came to see Oliver Tambo who had collapsed with a stroke towards the end of 1989, as he was hospitalized here. He might also have seen you there.

Johan Peanberg: Yes.

Madi Gray: So the leaders came over and while they were here, the ANC was unbanned on 2 February 1990. And Mandela was released on the 11th, the following Sunday. I remember there being all sorts of things set up including a big gathering at Folkets Hus on Sunday the 4th, and there was a lot to celebrate that day. The leaders were still very sceptical that this actually meant change; only when Mandela was released did they begin to believe.
Johan Peanberg: Yes. Much later Maj Wechselman wanted to make a film about women in the South African liberation movement, and needed money and an organization to act as sponsor to get other funds. She sent me a letter and I think we were the organization that helped her to get money from the rest of the LO unions, and we raised quite a lot. At the time South Africa was out of the general picture. Unfortunately I've never had the opportunity to see it as I've travelled so much in the last seven, eight years. There hasn't been a week when I haven't been travelling abroad, I'm always going back and forth, so I haven't seen it, but I've seen many of the other good films she's done, she's done a lot of good films. When it comes to other things that we did, there a lot of trade unions in South Africa, so we tried to help them in their amalgamation process.

Madi Gray: Were your first contacts with SAMWU while Mandela was still in prison, which would have been during the 1980s?

Johan Peanberg: Yes. We supported SAMWU, the South African Municipal Workers Union, which was a truly radical progressive trade union, with their head office in Cape Town. They have, a General Secretary living there, and the President. I met him only once, one April in Oslo. Unfortunately this amalgamation never took place and I don't know why. Maybe the history and background of the unions were too different, but the idea was to create one huge public sector union. It was a question of amalgamation of SAMWU, NEHAWU, the Health and Allied Workers Union, and one or two others.

Madi Gray: Did you have useful contacts outside the unions?

Johan Peanberg: I must say that all the credit here in Sweden should go to the Isolate South Africa Campaign (ISAK) and the Africa Groups. Without their consistent, accurate, and good information, which I regularly got, my work would have been harder. Some, like Lars Hult, are dead. Another good man working with them was Magnus Walan, who is now with Diakonia. There were some very good people long before Magnus, but all these people who were in the Africa Groups played a vital role and usually do not get the credit and appreciation they should have been given, they have done terrifically good jobs.

Madi Gray: That's nice to hear.

Johan Peanberg: The Africa Groups were not always appreciated by the trade union movement. There were times when I had to defend them because for many years there was friction, because some of the people in the trade union movement had the cold warrior view that it wasn't a struggle against apartheid, but it was a struggle against the communists. So,
whenever they saw somebody who was against apartheid, they saw somebody who was for communism. This did a lot of damage unfortunately.

Madi Gray: Now we're on to some of the problems. Were there others that affected your work, making it more difficult?

Johan Peanberg: Generally speaking, a difficulty that I feel when I think back, is that if there had been only one liberation movement in each country it would have been much easier, but there were at least two. You had to make an assessment and try to find out who is who, who is the true representative of the people. It was not very difficult for me. We wrote once that these are the true representatives, but we also pointed out that there were so-called others. This was a problem. There were people who took this as a reason for saying maybe we should support both. We never did that, in any place where I had any influence.

Madi Gray: So in the case of South Africa, it was the ANC?

Johan Peanberg: Yes, and only the ANC.

Madi Gray: SWAPO in Namibia, and in Zimbabwe, ZANU?

Johan Peanberg: ZANU, and only ZANU. From the beginning I think that I had difficulty deciding in Zimbabwe. But having met Robert Mugabe, I can't remember what year it was, I was really impressed by him.

Madi Gray: A lot of people were.

Johan Peanberg: He was distinct, he was a good speaker. Without trust I wouldn't have suggested that the ZANLA youth league became a member of the International Socialist Youth Union. When I was there it was a way of showing that we had to resolve problems in Zimbabwe. I think it's very difficult today to see the same thing in Zimbabwe. I haven't followed events closely, but I find it disappointing.

When my friend, Claude Chokwenda who had been their representative in Stockholm, was cut out completely, from that time on I started to think, good heavens, what is it about? He had done a lot of voluntary work, had never been paid anything.

Then there were all sorts of other difficulties, sometimes, even problems amongst the representatives. If you take an organization like the ANC, I am now speaking about before the time that they became the leading force in a free South Africa, in the 1970s, they had difficulties because they had a lot of young people here and couldn't feed them, so these people had difficulties in surviving. I don't know if you ever met them, but we did a couple of times, and we had a staunch policy that came from me, saying we would only give support
inside but no support outside, because it is wrong to build things outside. I think it is inside
that you have to give the support.

Madi Gray: Did you meet the representatives of the liberation movements?

Johan Peanberg: The movements would send somebody, sometimes they were married
couples, and sometimes they were university students. It was a tough life for them because
of the climate. Surviving in a country like Sweden where everything is different and it gets so
cold and dark, and also there are all the things that they would like to have. However
politically wise it was, I can only say that most of the people who I met as representatives did
a good job.
It's one thing to fight a war against colonisers and apartheid, but it's another one to strengthen
democracy once they came home and had liberated their countries. It's very different, and I
must say that I was sometimes amazed at a statement, but they had to make certain
statements because they got a lot of support from the Soviet Union and from Central and East
European countries, though we knew that these countries were not the best examples of
democracy, to put it mildly.

Madi Gray: You were able to identify the liberation movements that you supported and were
clear in your support to these movements. In all trade union work in South Africa, for a long
time only SACTU, the South African Congress of Trade Unions, was able to move around
outside the country. Did you have relationships with them?

Johan Peanberg: Yes, SACTU was the trade union arm of the ANC, but the relationship
became somewhat problematic for two reasons. Let me first say that I have the same view
that I spoke about with the liberation movements, that the people of SACTU who I met were
good people, courageous people. The problem was that in LO and TCO, the Swedish trade
union confederations, SACTU was for some time not regarded as a true trade union
movement, because people inside South Africa could not say, "I'm a member of SACTU".
Had they done so they would have been immediately kicked out and probably put into prison
or sent somewhere else, so this was one problem, which I tried to raise a few times within LO.
The second was that SACTU was considered to be too closely related to the ANC, which
meant that even people, who understood that it was not possible to openly say that one was a
member of SACTU, could say, "Show me a document where SACTU has an opinion of its
own that is not a blueprint of the ANC".
In Kommunal we had a relationship with SACTU. We even drew up programmes for SACTU
representatives to travel around to visit branches of ours and through branches of ours to get
support and create personal and trade union relationships.

Madi Gray: For a while SACTU had a representative in Denmark, Patrick Mzizi.
Johan Peanberg: Yes, Patrick was one of them, quite true.

Madi Gray: John was here as well, John Gaetsewe, that's going back a long time.

Johan Peanberg: Longer yes.

Madi Gray: The conflict within the ICFTU and the international trade union movement, which reflected the cold war conflict in politics, did that affect your work?

Johan Peanberg: I think that it did. To me personally it was clear that SACTU was the trade union arm of the ANC, and the ANC was a national liberation movement. You don't ask a national liberation movement that is fighting a war, you don't ask their trade union arm to make statements which contradict statements of the liberation movement. Unfortunately, thinking back on it, I'm not very proud of the Swedish trade union movement's treatment of SACTU. If you brought up the question of SACTU it was like a bull at a bullfight, you'd rather focus on the matador than on the bull. This meant that you'd rather treat it as if the matador was the money with which you could do things. You would rather see that money went directly to organizations which could do something inside, that became the way to deal with it. But I must say personally I'm not at all proud of the lack of understanding and the lack of general support of the trade union movement to SACTU. There were even people who would say if we give money to SACTU we are just building up something outside South Africa. And there were people who were critical of both Patrick and the ANC, with no right, in my opinion. I think it was simply cold war attitudes.

Madi Gray: Right. Now I would like to go on to COSATU, because you must have had relationships with COSATU as well.

Johan Peanberg: Yes, we did. COSATU is a confederation like LO, so LO had close cooperation, but we had a relationship through our international organization, which is the Public Service International, and we also had a relationship with COSATU, so money that we gave from the union went through the Public Service International directly to COSATU.

Madi Gray: So it was multilateral aid more than bilateral aid?

Johan Peanberg: Yes, we had meetings, we met the leadership of COSATU, we supported them in their initial struggles and work. If we look back today and see that some have become multi-millionaires and the biggest supporters of private corporations, it's a problem. I'm not saying that it doesn't happen in our countries. I don't think it has anything to do with colour or skin. People change once they change their lives, but I'm not very proud of what we did at the time, and I'm not very proud of what these people are doing today either. I just hope that they know what they're doing.
Madi Gray: One of the things that are interesting when they turn out statistics in South Africa is to see how wealth is shifting. There's a shift in the sense that there are now hundreds of millionaires from the previously disadvantaged groups in South Africa. In 1990 there was a handful. It's not simply that there are millionaires, there's now a substantial middle-class. One needs to build up a substantial middle-class throughout society; I mean middle-class in terms of earning capacity, at the same time as one reduces poverty. The question really is how much poverty is being reduced.

Johan Peanberg: That's one of the questions I'm looking at, because I believe that it is the most important human rights issue to discuss. All the other human rights have no meaning if you live in extreme poverty, all the other rights that the Western world has always been fighting for are of little or no importance if you don't get enough food in your stomach, if you don't have any shelter, and so forth. I must say I'm not very proud of the present government in South Africa or any of these states if I look at their way of getting people from poverty. The last figures that I have are from 2003, so I don't have the latest ones, but they tell me that in all the countries that we are speaking about, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. There is a middle-class in South Africa, yes, you're right, there was already an Indian middle-class twenty-five years ago, that has grown bigger though it's small, but none if you look in the countryside. I have reliable contacts with different organizations that do these studies. They read the government studies and then they check them with their own studies. It's extremely difficult in a globalised market economy because you need all your millionaires, you need investments from abroad, you need everything, and this makes it difficult.

I have been engaged in the Vietnam solidarity movement for the last twenty-five, thirty years, or more. There are still issues to be dealt with in Vietnam. A good example I'm preaching about sometimes is that Vietnam is one of the best countries in the world to raise those people who are extremely poor. Year after year Vietnam is raising people from poverty. Yet they also have a lot of difficulties, they have corruption. If you ask me, all the countries that we've been speaking about are extremely corrupt, there's no such country that isn't corrupted.

Madi Gray: There's corruption and corruption.

Johan Peanberg: Okay. We have corruption in Sweden also, but can you compare our corruption with the corruption of some of these countries? I put it to you that I still believe that in spite of all these things they have the right to have their own corruption.

Madi Gray: Before we leave the struggle period, what would you say were real highlights for you? We talked a bit about some of the problems, what about the highlights?

Johan Peanberg: They are not exactly highlights but I remember when reading or watching or seeing things on television, the atrocities, the things that we thought were impossible, the
use of force against unarmed people, and to see that people were treated like animals or when they were shot at, people in peaceful demonstrations. These were things that made people in Sweden angry, and they expressed it through collecting money, in giving support, in getting people to understand their problems, and so they were not highlights, but they did matter a lot. They were extremely valuable for explaining; one picture can explain more than a thousand words.

Madi Gray: You mentioned an experience that is probably very illustrative, when you were in South Africa and some people asked you to assist them with a petition.

Johan Peanberg: Yes, it was on my first visit to Port Elizabeth and there was a huge demonstration, I don't know how many thousands of people. We had a trade union delegation from the Nordic Municipal Workers and we were asked if we wouldn't join them when they were delivering their petition. I remember I asked, “Why do you want us?” and this woman said, “They would have to be more careful,” I can't remember the exact words, but the meaning was really clear to me that the police would be more careful not to shoot or to become violent if there was somebody of their own colour, if we would join them. Then we went along and we saw these people who were receiving the petition and they looked like some kind of nineteenth century colonial people, but you could see that when these petitioners came, they were afraid. They had a lot of military forces, armoured cars; it was almost like a preparation for an armed confrontation. Nothing happened, they delivered the petition and people went back to their houses.

I think that these things are important. I have a few clear memories. I remember a meeting that I had with the leadership of the PAC in South Africa, and we had a lengthy discussion about their slogan that was “One bullet, one settler”, that also gave me something that I will never forget. There was this very intellectual, highly qualified man and he based his position upon history, what had happened to them, but there just wasn't an inch to give to find a way, a solution for both white settlers and former settlers and the original South African people. I remember it shook me quite a lot.

Madi Gray: Was it in Sweden that you had this conversation?

Johan Peanberg: Oh, I've had it many times, but this particular one was in a restaurant, a very snobby restaurant somewhere in South Africa.

Madi Gray: And would have been after 1990, after the PAC and the ANC were unbanned?

Johan Peanberg: No, that was before.

Madi Gray: Okay. So your first visit to Port Elizabeth was also before the ANC was unbanned, before the organizations were unbanned, and would have been during the 1980s?
Johan Peanberg: Yes. In Sweden, if I look back, there was this very long and slow acceptance of apartheid, not by word but by deed. At the time it was possible that we did or said one thing, but our business people did not follow the words, they acted differently from what they said.

Madi Gray: In other words they were making anti-apartheid statements, but actually supporting the government, is that what you're saying?

Johan Peanberg: Well I'm not sure that they supported the government. What they did was find a way of getting around sanctions. I think that it was a way that became unacceptable and people in Sweden wanted it to stop.
I also had some friends in the United States for instance, Afro-Americans, who were very active in this struggle and when they were demonstrating they were arrested. They showed great courage. There are different ways of remembering.
I remember the Olympic Games in Mexico, the 200 meters. Those events were also to me directly related, it had to with the United States, but what was happening in the United States had a direct bearing in South Africa.

Madi Gray: I don't remember that 200 meters in Mexico, I must admit.

Johan Peanberg: It doesn't matter, but they raised their fists in a black power salute.

Madi Gray: Oh yes, I remember that. They were almost disqualified as a result.

Johan Peanberg: Oh yes, and once they got home to the US their scholarships were taken away, they lost their rights to study, they lost everything.

Madi Gray: What do you think it meant to the people of South Africa and Namibia, or Southern Africa, the support of people like yourself and the Municipal Workers’ Union in Sweden and the Nordic and International Unions?

Johan Peanberg: I really don't know, one small and supportive organisation, I can't say what it meant. We did what every decent person should have done, 6 years or 60 years earlier. I don't know.

Madi Gray: If we turn the question around, if you think about the solidarity work not only in Southern Africa, but also Vietnam and so on, what effect did that have in Sweden and the Nordic countries?
Johan Peanberg: It had a positive effect. In the past foreign policy had been something for diplomats in the foreign office, but with the change during the anti-apartheid movement, or the solidarity movement in Vietnam, it became something for the people of Sweden and for the organizations of Sweden. At the time we could be quite proud of our engagement, of our knowledge. A lot of people knew a lot about what was going on, we would listen, we would be informed regularly by our TV, we would have special programmes, etc. We wouldn't have the kind of programmes that we have today.

A friend of mine who's a little older said that it feels like the 1930s in Germany when they had the most decadent time. I'm happy to say we don't have Nazism, but it is not very nice, culturally, to be reminded that we are living in a similar time.

It was a time when people were proud to involve themselves in something which had to be done, where they thought that justice should win, and people had convictions. I remember a lot of discussion at the time, demonstrations, attending schools, seminars, travelling around in Sweden. I think we mattered, what we did, because Sweden is a small country.

It mattered because we had at the time a Prime Minister who became well known internationally on the question of Vietnam. I remember that we would get this press spokesman of the Pope calling us, I belonged to the Vietnam movement, asking, "What does Olof Palme say?" because his voice was somebody’s who mattered to the world at the time.

Madi Gray: Since the ANC came into power in South Africa in 1994, have you kept up contact with the trade unions in South Africa?

Johan Peanberg: Yes. We've a relationship with SAMWU, we invite them to our congress, not every year. They have a programme nowadays, and we are invited to their congress. I have attended at least two of their congresses. I follow them, I follow what goes on the website and in their newspaper, their struggling, its tough for them.

Usually it’s tough for municipal workers in many parts of the world because of deregulation, privatization, cut downs on public sector size, etc, so they are in tough positions. Maybe you heard yesterday or the day before that the Japanese government tried to privatize their post offices, but they lost.

Madi Gray: In Japan?

Johan Peanberg: Yes, they lost and now they are going to have a new election. So these are things which are going on all over. I think you could say that the struggle that goes on within the public sector unions is a struggle that is part and parcel of a democratic society. What the public sector unions are doing is politically decided upon by government, so you can change that, citizens have a possibility to influence that. If you reduce the public sector and give it to private industries you are actually reducing the democratic spectrum of life, so this is quite a tough struggle.

Our brothers and sisters in South Africa have had some tough things to deal with and its not
going to be easier in the future. We try to keep contact. We invite one another to know what goes on. The people in South Africa had great expectations that the ANC, once they came to power, would change their lives. They expected shelters which are good, electricity, water, food, decent jobs, decent salaries, they are all tough things, and justice, they expected that something would happen because of all the injustices that they had gone through in their lives, and that is very difficult to do.

Madi Gray: Yes.

Johan Peanberg: I said that the role of the women of South Africa and in fact all countries, is something that has come to be a part of my thinking, and relates a little bit to Sweden today. There is several thousand African women here in Sweden and if you take a city like Stockholm, if they speak up nowadays, you hear about women being molested and harassed. African women are the ones who have been mostly beaten, in fact every year one or two of them are killed.

Madi Gray: Here in Sweden?

Johan Peanberg: Yes, and this comes back to the fact that the upbringing of African men must be very special, a man is a man, a boy is a boy, 20 times, 10 times, 60 times, more important than girls. I wasn’t aware of it; it’s only lately that I’ve become aware of it. I can sometimes go and get a ticket for the underground and go and sit and watch. If it’s an African man who sits there, he needs more space, I mean you would think that he’s very big, though he isn’t, but in his mind he is very big. This is a thing that I have been thinking a lot about.

What makes African men so, usually if you take society as a whole, men historically have all the positions, but I find that in Africa somehow, I hope I’m wrong, but I find that the difference in Africa is greater than many other parts of the world.

I have a friend who is the Chair of an African women's network against violence and I promised that I would cooperate with her because it is a disgrace how bad it is. African women are treated worse than anyone else, and we know that the African women, the South African women, played an outstanding role in the liberation struggle. I would say this is one of the most important things to deal with. I tried to talk to some of the people that I met, the present leadership, people of the trade unions, I don’t understand it at all. They think that there is least twenty-five hundred thousand other issues which are more important.

Madi Gray: Than women's rights?

Johan Peanberg: Yes. It concerns me a lot, that people in the trade union leadership, are not serious. I mean it’s half the population, but until now I haven’t met anyone who has found this an issue of importance. Yet it took Sweden quite a few thousand years before we were there, and it’s still only like lipstick, I mean its feminism is not really what it should be.
Madi Gray: No.

Johan Peanberg: But today in Sweden every politician is a feminist and every political party is feminist and we have parties of feminists, we have so many different feminist parties nowadays that we don't know what's feminist and what's not. This concerns me a lot, because violence in South Africa and in these countries is domestic violence, in families. There's so much violence and it's been so well written about, if you read good literature from anywhere. Madi Gray: You mean the violence is being described?

Johan Peanberg: Yes. Maybe not in the petite bourgeoisie, the middle-class, I don't know, because they stay outside, otherwise it is a very violent society.

Madi Gray: Yes, unfortunately, that's one of the big problems I can see in South Africa.

Johan Peanberg: The first time I was there I was shocked by it, clearly, and not by the violence between black and white, but by the social violence.

Madi Gray: In families, and on the street.

Johan Peanberg: Yes. Everywhere, but I understand it if you're used to giving orders and not listening that there is lack of dialogue. I think that's very violent.

Madi Gray: Yes, and thank you for sharing your memories with me.