

# Anthems Of Freedom

by A. Siemsen

To the worried minds of the South African regime all opposition is potentially dangerous, even singing, and has to be suppressed. There were the recent cases of Oscar Mpeta, the old trade unionist, who was sentenced to five years imprisonment for daring to sing, and Rufus Radebe and Joseph Charles, two young musicians who were punished with 2 and 4 years imprisonment for singing a song about Nelson Mandela. But anyone who thinks that such action by the South African regime is only a recent phenomenon is mistaken. The story of James Madhlope Phillips, also known as the "South African Robeson" is a case in point.

James was born with a gift to sing and throughout his life he has been making use of his talent. He loves singing and has built up a huge repertoire of songs from all over the world, particularly songs of the people, spirituals, and workers' songs. He is self-taught, since the chances for receiving professional training were spoilt for him by the government. In 1948 a wealthy, generous

## Discrimination

South African who was impressed by his singing offered to pay for his training at a musical academy abroad, but the South African government refused to let him have a passport and he could not take up the offer. On another occasion in 1951 when he entered a talent competition on the radio, which offered a financial reward and a training opportunity to the winner, the radio audience consistently voted for him, but he was cut out of the programme the moment the sponsors of the programme learned that he was black.

Having the gift of a good musical ear has helped him to commit to memory the many songs sung by the people in his homeland of South Africa – songs of sadness, songs of joy, songs of defiance, rallying songs and songs calling to action, as well as songs of humour and satire – and to use them well, to strengthen political actions and to give joy to

friends and comrades at social gatherings.

At an early age, growing up in Sophiatown, he had become aware of the injustices of racial discrimination and resolved to fight them. He joined the ANC and became a member of the Garment Workers Union in Johannesburg, and was elected its chairman in 1940 and reelected for 13 consecutive years until a banning order prevented him from continuing in office.

Traditionally song and music accompany all social activity in South Africa, be it singing at a birth, a wedding, a funeral, or a social or political gathering, a demonstration or a rally. A trade union meeting may often begin or end with a song, a strike be accompanied by rousing songs, etc. There are many recorded examples of this on recent newsreels, but much fewer from the earlier years, like the many songs created and sung during the 'Defiance Against Unjust Laws Campaign' which began in 1952, or earlier still at the mine workers' strikes and the many demonstrations against the pass laws. Songs are part and parcel of the struggle for freedom and are significant historical documents.

James Madhlope Phillips is helping to preserve these songs and to make them known to the world at large, so that they can continue to be an ally helping to defy apartheid.

He was *there* during the 'African Mine Workers Strike' in 1946, organising and encouraging the people through singing, being arrested for "aiding and abetting an 'illegal' strike".

He was *there* during the 'Defiance of Unjust Laws Campaign' in 1952 and was arrested together with Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Yusuf Dadoo, Ahmed Kathrada, to name but a few; and when he came in front of the judge the prosecutor said that Phillips was accused of "inciting the people". "Inciting the people to do what?" the judge asked. "Inciting the people to sing" was the reply.

James's continued political and trade union activity – he had been one of the founder members of the

Transvaal Council of Non-European Trade Unions, now known as SACTU (the South African Council of Trade Unions) – finally led to his being banned. Thus prevented from all social, political and trade union activity he left South Africa – still without a passport, to continue a politically active life struggling for the freedom of the oppressed.

He came to England and lent his voice to many valiant causes of international solidarity. He could be heard at a rally to free Angela Davis, or in honour of Paul Robeson or Martin Luther King. He could be seen on stage e.g. in the play *South Africa 70*, as well as in the concert hall, or performing in the open air at festivals in

## Solidarity

Alexandra Palace and elsewhere. He toured Europe, alone and with Mayibuye, the cultural unit of the ANC with whom he produced a record. But in recent years he has concentrated his efforts in presenting the songs which have been born in the midst of the struggle in South Africa created by its people and depicting their history. He sings these songs from his heart and illustrates in word and song what it is that the people of South Africa want and how the songs have become more determined and defiant over the years, indicating that the people are no longer patiently awaiting change but willing to fight for it.

James Madhlope Phillips has brought the message of his people to audiences throughout Europe as well as Canada, and by taking the trouble to teach others, individuals and choirs, in Germany, Holland and Sweden, the songs of his people and instilling in them a feeling for the real meaning behind these songs, he has brought forth many hundreds of ambassadors speaking up for the right of the suppressed masses in South Africa to be free human beings. These songs, as he says, "are a part of the armoury of our people, they are marching side by side with them, they are a way of life".