

# How the treason trial was won

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Histories of countries, cities and organisations are multifarious and unpredictable. They are made up, in cases concerning liberation movements, of a struggle between the masses of the oppressed and exploited and the cruel exploiting cliques. This struggle is often bitter and lengthy. Punishment is meted out by the oppressor and many mistakes made by the righteous. But at the end of this just war for freedom, the unbreakable spirit and determined resolution of those who enter into such struggle, prevails.

Such an history-making epoch is characterised by years of tough, grinding work. By deep serious changes of tactics and strategies. It is thought provoking and dangerous. It requires resolute implementation and often leads to sad casualties along the way.

But this sort of history can also have its amusing side as well. And one will find that this lighter side is often based on the traditions of the people engaged in this mighty struggle.

## LEGENDS

We in the ANC are no exceptions to this rule. Legends of our vibrant organisation are generated by these "behind the scenes" incidents.

Which takes me to the second half of the historic fifties, a decade in which our movement was involved in so many successful and hard-hitting campaigns: the Defiance Campaign, the Congress of the People, the Great Women's March

on Pretoria, the various Bus Boycotts and finally the Treason Trial when 156 leaders were arrested and charged with fomenting communism by preaching and circulating the Freedom Charter. This was construed as seditious and could carry the death penalty and long prison sentences for the accused.

Some of the most brilliant legal brains like Maisels and Bram Fischer were brought together in defence of our comrades. Amongst the many well-known arrested comrades were giants like Mandela, Tambo, Kotane, Slovo, Kathrada and many others too numerous to mention here.

Serious and momentous meetings — legal, political and financial were taking place every hour of every day. The whole movement was geared to gain support from the millions of the oppressed in our land; to ensure that the legal costs were met; and to enable everyone of the accused not only to be fed daily but also to receive sufficient allowance to sustain them over a long period.

## INFLUENCE

The influence of this trial reached to every corner of the world. The corridors of power everywhere were affected by it.

It is in this atmosphere of intense political and legal fervour that those old stalwarts: Willian Letlalo (who recently died at the age of 93) "General" China and Hosiah Tshehla enter into the picture... I was working at "New Age"



Demonstrations outside the court: We stand by our leaders...

at the time. Comrades William and Hosiah were our best sellers; "General" China a leading agent of our Xmas Hampers. Comrade William had possession of the keys to the sales office.

The Treason Trial had been in session for several months. It had been transferred to Pretoria and was held in a recently converted and renovated old oblong-shaped synagogue now the newly constituted court. Everyday busloads of the accused were being ferried from various points in Johannesburg to this court nearly forty miles away.

I had decided to come into the office much earlier than usual as I had some urgent unfinished business to attend to. As I climbed the stairs towards our offices, I heard loud, rasping voices tearing at the stillness of the morning. When I reached our landing, I was startled to see the front door open and these sounds coming from behind the open door.

### INCREDIBLE

I entered upon an incredible sight. There were these three comrades sitting on the floor throwing bones. They explained that they were involved in

casting a spell upon the enemy so as to ensure the release of all our comrades.

Comrade William took me aside and confided that they had been gathering early every morning at the office prior to the journey to Pretoria. After throwing the bones they would take the first bus or cadge a lift with the first car to the capital so as to implement daily the second phase of the ritual. This entailed walking seven times round the synagogue before the trial began. These were the walls of Jericho which had to fall down!

"Comrade, don't worry", whispered old William in my ear, "you'll see, we will make Rumpff (the senior judge at the trial) bring in a verdict of not guilty". He went on to add: "Just leave it to us, you don't have to worry. All will come right."

What comrade William "forgot" to tell me was about the third phase of their operation. A phase in which he alone with the consent of the other two, was involved in.

I found out about this quite by accident one bright sunny morning when I was asked by our manager to attend some sessions of the trial in Pretoria. The oblong-shaped court was

in session. Upstairs the gallery was crowded. The trial court was down below with the three judges raised above on a seated platform and clearly in view of both the court itself and spectators above.

As I took my seat and gazed around at the rest of the spectators, my eyes alighted on old William sitting in the front row facing the judges. The sun threw strong beams of light through the window and as I gazed a little more intently at the old fighter, I was startled to see a glint of metal shining from the sleeve of his jacket and ending in his half clenched hand resting on the rails. I noticed that it seemed to be aimed at Rumpff.

I thought that comrade William had taken leave of his senses and was concealing a revolver with which to shoot the Judge-President. I had to move quickly without disturbing the tranquility of the court. I was in a deep, agitated sweat as I eventually squeezed silently on the bench beside him. He looked at me, smiled and immediately

resumed his vigil.

### WEAPON

"Comrade William", I hissed through the side of my dry mouth, "are you mad? Put that weapon away immediately." He took no notice, so I had a closer look at the object and discovered it was part of a spoke of a bicycle wheel reaching up his sleeve and with the sharp edge protruding between two fingers of his clenched fist. It was pointing very definitely at Rumpff and whenever that judge moved, so did that spoke in unison.

During the next break in the proceedings, comrade William very patiently explained: "*You see comrade, I keep this pointing at Rumpff's heart all the time. So when he moves I must still keep it pointing at his heart as well. Then one day, when the verdict comes, this together with the other two things (phases) will change his evil heart and force a right decision from him.*"

At every stage thereafter when



..... and the police baton charge

more and more of the accused were released, I'd get an excited phone call at "New Age" office from William saying: "You see comrade, it is working." This continued right up to the final day when the last of the accused were released.

I am sure that comrades William, Hosiah and "General" China fervently believed that their three phase ritual behind the scenes was instrumental

in saving our leaders from the gallows or imprisonment. Both Hosiah and William have gone to their rest. I have not, as yet, been able to trace the fate of "General" China.

But one thing that is certain is that their memory lives on in the hearts of thousands of comrades who participated in those historic events and contributed to the many legends of our invincible movement.

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We must harness the collective strength of the working class not merely to improve the immediate economic conditions of that class, but to bring about democratic change in our country. The ANC joins those trade unionists who call for greater involvement on the part of workers and their unions in the struggle for democratic change.

1985 falls on the centenary of May Day. In recognition of the bonds that link the workers of South Africa with those of other lands, May Day was marked in a number of industrial centres throughout South Africa during 1984. We call on all our workers to ensure by their actions that May Day is recognised as a paid public holiday.

In a unique show of international solidarity, the Black mine workers, who are amongst the lowest paid and most brutally exploited of our workers, dipped into their over-lean pockets and made a modest donation towards the strike fund of the British miners, who are waging a life and death struggle to save their jobs. We take this opportunity to commend this exemplary action on the part of our miners.

### **The Rural People's Right to the Land**

The dispossession of our people of the land that is theirs remains one of the most burning national grievances. The gross injustice of this historic crime has been compounded by the racists' arrogant attempt to deprive the African majority of their inalienable birthright as citizens of their country, South Africa. Millions of our people in the rural areas are brutally exploited as agricultural workers on farms carved out of their ancestral lands. Their daily lives are dominated by the dictates of the racist White farmers and agricultural companies against whom they have absolutely no redress, because they are the least organised and mobilised. The land question must be resolved, if needs be, the hard way.

In the meantime, we repeat our call to our people to give serious attention to the organisation and mobilisation of our rural masses. Basing ourselves on the needs of the people, and taking due account of the concrete conditions of their existence, we must devise suitable organisational structures and mechanisms to reach our rural masses and provide them with the organisational and political tools to defend themselves against exploitation and to assert their right to the land. As we said last year, we must place the perspective of seizing the land from the dispossessor in front of our rural masses and educate them to understand that this is a task that calls for dedication, determination and sacrifice.

The solution to the land question is inextricably tied to the struggle against the Bantustans, where the puppets, not content to do the dirty work of the Pretoria racists, have taken it upon themselves to impose even greater burdens on our oppressed people. Some of these Bantustan puppets have taken firm positions on the side of their masters in Pretoria and against the oppressed people and their organisations. Whenever the popular masses rise and deliver telling blows against the apartheid system their puppet voices are heard above the din of battle, denouncing the people and defending the people's enemy.