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Gerhart has contributed this interview to Aluka

ZITHULELE CINDI

Absolom Zithulele Cindi was an activist in the black consciousness movement and later in the Azanian People's Organization and the trade union movement. Born in Alexandra township, Johannesburg in 1950, he attended Orlando West High School in Soweto in the late 1960s. In 1972 he joined the Black People's Convention [BPC] when it was founded, and rose through the ranks, becoming secretary-general in December 1973. In September 1974 he was arrested following student rallies to mark the victory of FRELIMO in Mozambique. He was charged under the Terrorism Act and became a defendant in the marathon trial of the SASO Nine in 1975-76. Found guilty of "committing acts capable of endangering the maintenance of law and order," he served a five year sentence on Robben Island. Following his release in December 1981, he joined AZAPO and later became the organizing secretary of the National Forum in 1983. In 1986 he got involved in the administration an electrical workers union affiliated to the National Council of Trade Unions, and in 1989 he became the assistant general secretary of MEWUSA, formed by the amalgamation of four NACTU unions for metal and electrical workers. Later he served as MEWUSA general secretary and national chairperson of AZAPO.

Cindi was interviewed in Johannesburg on July 5, 1989, by Dr. Gail Gerhart of Columbia University, who was involved in preparing volume 5 of *From Protest to Challenge*. The following is a verbatim transcription from tapes.

...Why was AZAPO promoting the concept of "black communalism"?

One thing is whether we seemed to be furthering the aims of banned organizations. So everything we were doing had to appear to be very much germane to whatever we were saying and how we see the situation, which was of course in more instances than one the same [as seen by the older banned organizations] . . . You also had to be careful that you are treading a minefield of so many laws and legislation, that you don't run foul of it.

So "black communalism" had to be the thing that is promoted, so that people understand it's the economic system that is informed by the historical and indigenous background of the people, that spirit of sharing [i.e. without using the term “socialism”.] The cardinal point was that spirit of sharing. But it was not looking at the mechanics of how that worked. But it developed from that.

And people started questioning that, saying there are elements within this communalism that are not really good enough. And people then misinterpret these. Because some would say that the very fact that some were more affluent than others, doesn't that suggest a society of acquisitiveness similar to capitalism, where others have acquired so many things that they're able now to give a bit of that. Then you had to say okay, maybe those elements are in that system, but that's not what we're proposing. We have to say how do we then visualize a social system, based on the principles of black communalism, and then move on from there. That became the Black Manifesto.

Of course, later on, in the early 'eighties, there is the Azanian People's Manifesto, though it is slightly different. But there is some correlation. Certain sentiments are informed by the Mafikeng Manifesto. But at the same time what you are now having is the emergence or intrusion of other people who have got another perspective. So now it's a synthesis of those views.

What does the AZAPO document add that's not in the earlier one?

In the sense that it talks about quite a few things like "nation building", and developing a common language, and making emphasis on certain things like anti-sexism and anti-racism as well.

Whereas initially we felt that it is not our preoccupation to keep on explaining how anti-racist we are — because since the emergence of BC there have always been accusations that "that's a racist group." And we've spent much time trying to explain that actually we are not racist; we believe we should operate on our own. But it went on *ad infinitum*, *ad nauseum*. So then we felt we need to be silent on that, because our priority is to mobilise the people towards achieving their own liberation.

You find in that manifesto that emphasis, because against the challenges and the charges that we were racists, you had this emergence of non-racialism. So you had to say even with non-racialism again, it doesn't say you are against racism. It is merely being silent on racism. So we have to come out again that we are against racism. But we are against racism, being a certain particular group in society that is deprived and disadvantaged and dispossessed. So it's from that perspective that we actually are fighting against racism, and we don't believe that having fought against racism we would still be the same people who would come around and say we want to practice racism.

But the main thing is now that you did not have only BC-oriented people drawing up the Azanian People's Manifesto, but now you had different groups: people coming from the Cape Action League, you had quite a number of groupings and a sprinkling of people from the UDF, they were there. And we broke up into commissions and we came up with this document which was accepted and adopted.

What more can you tell me about the Cape Action League and its input? Why were they drawn to the AZAPO leadership, and who actually made that link?

It's quite a number of factors, but I think what you would need to understand is that leadership within AZAPO at the time felt that rather than remain being parochial and sectarian, remaining being AZAPO and just drawing the BC exponents and adherents only, the struggle is much more broad than that. We become more effective when we bring other people, especially on certain issues which we are agreed upon.

Like on anti-collaboration, we found that we have people who are *ad idem* with us on that point. They may not necessarily be black consciousness-oriented but their outlook is quite progressive. They would have no truck or trade with collaborationists. So we felt let's bring those in. You have other groups which basically are against the system but they may not necessarily have formulated their own future vision. So those were brought in. And we felt that we need to come up with a structure, a forum, where we are going to bring all these ideas and then map our future together, rather than just become hegemonistic and say AZAPO is the one at the top and everyone must follow. We felt that we must bring them in.

The situation you're describing, would that have obtained right from 1978 when the initial AZAPO founders launched the organization? Or from somewhat later?

It's a situation that would have obtained in the 'sixties when black consciousness came on the scene. The difference is that then people had been cowed into submission and you could never discuss politics with anybody. Now you had this radical and militant outcrop of students who were the only people who were voicing out their opposition to anything they realised was not serving the interests of the people. Then you had others who were not allied to this kind of approach, the militant approach which we had adopted. You find that they are there, they are also against that [system]. But they didn't bargain for this kind of approach and the consequences thereof, which is the main thing.

So much so that we've always maintained that the black consciousness movement as a whole has always been a united front. We always brought in people on the basis of their commonality of their experiences; that they've got one experience and that's oppression, deprivation, exploitation and social degradation. That common experience brings them together. And naturally at that time the vibrant philosophy was black consciousness and people would really relate, and that look, it's because of these forces that we are oppressed.

So even Marxists in the late 'sixties would have been able to make common cause with you?

With us— [interruption]

... It's important and interesting to know how various ideological currents happened to flow together or apart at different times [e.g. BC and the Unity Movement]. So I'm interested in this question of the Cape Action League, when it was drawn in, and why, and who was involved?

Ja, I was in the process of explaining that. But then the question was: is it when AZAPO was formed, 1978, or earlier? So I was trying to show that even earlier, we had that kind of— . I was showing that it was a natural development within black consciousness that at some point in time you find people you can relate to, find people you can make common cause with on a number of issues, without necessarily identifying things the same way or interpreting society the same way.

So, in fact, we have always maintained that with our analysis of the situation in the country, given the dynamics that are involved, even if Marx were alive, in the late '60's early '70's, he would have made common cause with the black consciousness movement. Because we have managed to identify those for and against, the haves as against the have-nots. So, he would make common cause with us, without necessarily saying that "these are black consciousness" or whatever, and understand the praxis — why it has to be black consciousness [BC], basically.

So, we've always been a united front. In the '60's, we happened to be the most radical outcrop that was opposing the government, and we happened to be the youth. Elderly people had been cowed into submission . . . and they would never at all mention— . Even to mention the prime minister was taboo with them.

I remember at school, we were in that African Students Movement. When we'd raise such questions, someone would say "no, that's politics". We'd say no, that's "civics", to know who's the prime minister and so on. Teachers wouldn't even go anywhere near that topic.

But then to bring the point nearer home, when you look at BC, we would never look at a person and say what is your ideological background, inclinations, or leanings? We'd say, Look, this is a struggle; it demands total involvement. This is what informed the black consciousness movement. It's total oppression, total struggle, for total liberation. You can't say you're oppressed half-way. That's why you have BC groupings like the Black Parents Association where you had the Winnie Mandelas involved, and other people with other political inclinations. We had the Zeph Mothopengs involved. In fact, our thrust and approach was that these people who have been active and have suffered must not be forgotten. They must be given a role to play. They'll prove themselves to be worthy of that role or that structure that they're given, and in fact we are not out to condemn them.

Going back to the period of the late 'sixties or 1970 or so, did you at that age ever identify the black consciousness viewpoint as being at odds with the older Congress tradition?

Not really at the time; not at that stage. Basically we were saying that we believe that they have played a historical role. We were quite young, and here and now you read about this one or that one. You pick up a small book that mentions them and so on. You get a [mention?] of Charterism, as it were, and you'd have some curiosity to know more. Then you realize when you read deep down on Charterism that they were jailed or sent into exile for fighting for freedom as they characterize it.

Then you realize that those are people who have made a sacrifice. So now you have that curious, youthful admiration for them. There wasn't any deep down study of what they stood for and going to other things. Only later it emerges, early 'seventies, mid-'seventies when we now go with in-depth studies to look at them, and when we start unravelling all these things — the NRCs and their involvement in them — and their dabbling with some of the system-created [bodies].

How did you actually learn about that, when you started delving into that in the 1970s?

A number of books were available, history books...

Do you remember which particular ones?

Things like [Edward Roux's] *Time Longer Than Rope*, books like those. I think Mary Benson had written *Struggle for a Birthright*, although it's much of a eulogy of the ANC. But you read them and you start now saying this is what happened in the past. Today we are confronted with these situations. How do we look at it? You find throughout this ambivalence. Well, I mentioned the Natives Representative Councils where

leading figures within the ANC were involved. Then you say, hey! The further you read about their history that they were having councils of chiefs and things like those. So those things then make you sit up and say, "Hey, what's happening here?" And when you interact with some of them in discussion, you find that they are still steeped in that old tradition.

Do you mean you were also meeting individuals who had been active?

Yes. Though their involvement and contribution would be limited to them being proud that they had been involved in the past, you see? Then you would ask, but oppression is still continuing today. It's well and good to have been involved in the 'fifties, 'sixties but what are you saying now in the 'seventies? And they'd say no, now I'm old, I'm tired; it's left up to you, and so on. Through a discussion with some of them you realize that some of the things they were going out for basically were not what we would settle for. And of course it became even a more instructive period, our stay on Robben Island.

I'd like to come to that later.

So we'd meet with some who'd been active, sit and discuss with them, but you didn't discuss very in-depth. We just knew, okay, people are struggling for freedom. When you asked them to define the freedom they were struggling for, it was a nebulous kind of freedom.

And in fact they were more anti-white than we were alleged to have been. Because they tended to use whites as their reference point. If whites could have this and that, why can't we, that kind of thing. Hence you find the Defiance Campaign — going and sitting on benches and so on in '52.

And when you talk with a lot of them you will find that they were struggling for equal rights.

To be included in the existing system.

Exactly. They were not out to transform the system. Now we're not struggling for equal rights. We believe that we should first regain our land. I think maybe at that point we found that the thrust of the PAC grouping, which was making more emphasis on the land, was closer to that.

Were you also meeting old PAC people?

Yes, they were around. Some would say okay, some would pat you on the back; others would say it's okay boys that you are doing this, but you are too radical for us. But then you'd sit down and say, "But what do you mean 'too radical'? We're just making a meaningful contribution." Then they'd say, "But in our days at your age we would have never dreamed of doing those things, but you are doing them. The way you are approaching it is too much for us." Let's face it: they were worried about their families, their children.

Others you would find that they were never involved, but they would have a lot to say in discussing a period where you are not involved. And you just simply listen to them. So those kind of sources, discussions, literature and so on tended to give you an insight, and make you think okay, we are not on the same wave length, but be that as it may we are not going to diminish their role. We are going to acknowledge their contribution at a certain time in history — and we would move from there. . . .

Besides being interested in the ideological development, I'm also interested in the development of the strategic sense, from mere conscientization on to the later stages where people are trying to figure out what they are actually going to do.

There never was any convention or any meeting where people would say after we've been conscientized we'll do A, B, and C. The purpose of conscientization was to create awareness, and to provide the tools of analyzing the situation, that's the main thing. And then having analyzed things, you are told that look, you can't be conscious and then be stagnant. You become conscious and become action oriented. You are not to be spoon-fed that you are oppressed; you have to perceive that oppression. And accept and agree that this is oppression. Having felt oppression, what do you do thereafter? I think it comes out now in various forms of solutions. And they're not basically coordinated solutions. Some would opt for the military solution.

So the idea was that once you had your head screwed on right, then it's up to you what you do? The movement doesn't have a prescription for what you do?

Our teaching was that we strive for total liberation by whatever means possible, short of collaboration. Basically that's what we were saying. Like I said, we perceived it as total oppression, the kind that would involve total involvement.

But that's nebulous. Were people just supposed to do their own thing?

No. It wouldn't necessarily be nebulous. You don't expect every mother, every grandmother in the rural village, in the township and so on to opt for the military thing. The point is whatever approach is going to be taken, whatever action is going to be taken collectively, people can relate to that action, can identify with that action in their own spheres where they are involved. One thing which also we emphasize is that the military solution is not the only solution. Otherwise it becomes an imposition on the people when you say: look, here we are, your saviors; we came from outside to liberate you. The people will say: you liberated us but we are not participants in that liberation. You see this is not the thing.

Coming back to our base, in '72 we were already under pressure from people who were opting for the military solution.

Already by '72?

At SASO's GSC [General Students' Council]. I don't know if you've picked up this illustrious character, though it seems now he is no longer in the very heavy books of the ANC — Keith Mokoape? They left '72.

And that was the first—

Yes. But then that was already on. Within the movement we had to contend with it and suppress it, and say look, that is not the thing that we as a movement could ever carry out—

Or encourage anyone to—

Exactly. That's where now we said well, if you want that, it's your own decision. You see, what they wanted us to do at that GSC, the General Students Council, was to resolve that we're doing that. But we said that's suicide. How do you begin to do that? To join that is an individual decision, and you move from there. But that was the first flood. The others, I lost count. Being in an official position, we are not even keen to know who is doing that.

Now they left, then '73 you had another avalanche; in '74 another avalanche. '76 comes and people are already quite far, I mean they are already going out; quite prepared for that. So it started quite early. Now in 76, there was a real avalanche. The avalanche was against this background that was just sketched. There was this new [thrill?] of admiration, touched with adventurism, for the older movements—

So when people went out they thought it's all rosy there; that it's paradise. We'll be receiving the arms, get training, and come back and liberate our country. You know, that kind of adventurism, that kind of romanticism was there. People left on that note. And when they got out there they realized it's not all that you pictured.

But I was just sketching the involvement of other groups, as it were. I think that earlier period gives you an insight into how we got involved with people. We would have nothing to do with bantustans. But then there were people who were not having that same understanding and same interpretation. They believed that this guy [so-and-so from a bantustan] is good. I think you'll see in some SASO documents—

The [Themba] Sono thing?

No, before the Sono thing. We got someone from the Ciskei, [Curnick] Ndamse, to come in and address us.

From the Transkei.

Yah. And some people said he's in the bantustan, but he's a good academic. So from there the Sonos came with their thing and said no, we must involve them [bantustan people]; and we felt no— .

But that was in the early bantustan period, when people talked about using them as a Trojan horse. You could put your agents in there and take them over.

Yah. In fact that was what we were discussing in the early stage, when we were discussing the Sonny Leons and the Gatshas [Buthelezi]. Those people had been advised to move into those structures, and make them unworkable, as it were — or today "ungovernable." And then those people realized that no, we think they are workable!

Furthermore, they're profitable.

Yah! So they're the most vigorous defenders of those institutions and they're not out to crush them as they originally set out. They're defending them.

So in that unfolding scenario, we in the early days were accused, or rather were confused, with these various entities. Even the M. C. Bothas, the ministers of education et al, encouraged the development of black consciousness. They thought people are now accepting their concept of the bantustans and separateness.

So we thought, let's correct that, because even then we were still using negative terms like "nonwhite." We came and said let's clear this thing up. But when we started being radical, then they started sensing that there was danger coming up there.

Then we lost quite a few people who felt that we were too radical. In fact, even the formation of the BPC, although people don't realize this, we sort of hijacked it. It was going to be a nebulous sort of cultural organization, a nebulous structure.

Were you involved with its formation at the initial stages?

No, I joined about a year later. Mthuli Shezi recruited me. He was then the vice-president.

Can I digress for a moment and back up to something mentioned earlier, the African Students' Movement? Was that the same thing as ASA, the African Student Association?

No, ASM was for highschool students, but restricted to the Africans.

Was it an ANC or PAC brainchild?

No, it was purely students wanting— Not the ASUSA or ASA, not that. It was like what I said earlier on. We would read this and that, and it started as something for students to be involved in. Initially it was confined to the Transvaal, but then I think [Harry] Nengwekhulu came and addressed us at one of the high schools. I think he gave a paper on black consciousness, and the rudiments of black consciousness were explained. That it's not now confined to Africans; it includes the so-called coloureds and so-called Indians. So we also now had to say let's broaden our scope, and go national and include everybody rather than be just African high school students and confined to that.

Was it hard to persuade you of the virtue of including those two other groups?

I wasn't at the meeting Harry addressed. [But] then SASO was the "in" thing, and everybody was talking about SASO. This was '69-'70. I was in Form 5 when the high school year ended in 1970.

We had this African Students Movement, which was largely a group to debate. We would debate topical issues like religion, politics. You know, you are just slumbering there, but you know you're not happy with the social system. But you don't have an alternative, as it were. You haven't found one. But then comes the black consciousness philosophy, which says look, the problem is not confined to you. You see, there is a coloured township nearby here—

At that high school we used to question the privileged position that the whites occupied. So then you see that it's not only us; it's also this other grouping here, suffering from the same kind of oppression. And you identify with them.

So it was explained and then it became quite natural that let's accommodate these people. Then it became the South African Students Movement, and instead of being confined to the Reef now it went national. And now it involved quite a number of people.

But by then I had left high school. So I was just moving around, and I met Mthuli [Shezi]. And he said there's BPC. So I moved in. And unfortunately he could not go with us to the first Congress because of that train accident.

Tell me about BPC as an organization at the time you were drawn into it and became an office holder in it. Can you describe BPC's day-to-day organizational life? There was now a much wider spectrum of age and experience and regional backgrounds.

Yah, with BPC you involved a wider section of people. People's backgrounds, unlike the students who had that radical background, there were people who had at some time historically been involved with either the ANC or the PAC. They may not have been very prominent, but they felt they must always be involved in the struggle. And that became the better alternative to being in the bantustans.

Who were the older generation people in BPC?

Do you know Drake Koka?

Yes, and also Moerane, who was the editor of *The World.*

Yes, in fact he was the main driving force behind this super-cultural thing. So when that thing [collapsed] he fell by the wayside.

But there was Winnie Kgware, the mother, wife, to Professor [William] Kgware. She was quite committed to it, in the sense that here is a political organization where I can be active. Not committed to it in purely socialist terms, in the revolutionary sense, okay? Most people were not having that revolutionary vision. But they had that vision that our situation is not all that good and it needs to be addressed. And we believe that being involved in this organization we will make our contribution to whatever solution.

So that was the kind of thing. We came in and we were bridging the gap between the most radical elements coming from the universities and I wouldn't say necessarily conservative but maybe modest elements from the ghettos, from the rural villages, from the townships. So you have now an interplay of those forces.

And the day-to-day running, it would be like organizing seminars, or make pronouncements on a number of issues, and operate against a very stringent background of lack of resources and funds. We would try to interact with quite a cross-section of people, because our mission as BPC was to involve the elderly community.

People over thirty!

Even older. Middle-aged groupings. The approach of SASO tended to alienate people. People wanted to be involved, but they found it too radical for them, and they couldn't find a way where they could be comfortable and say "we are involved." So you had to have the BPC bring in all these people, from all walks of life. From women's organizations, church groups—

Are you saying that you had to turn down your own personal heat and militance in order to relate to these older people?

Not really. I mean there was no occasion where I could do that. But we had to find the best way of relating to people and getting an opportunity to understand what they're doing, and being able to support programs that you may have on a particular issue. You didn't necessarily have to tone down, but people appreciated most the approaches we made to them. Look, here's an issue; can we sit down and look at this issue together, and you give us your views, and so on. They'd say fine, but won't we run foul of the law? That was inevitably the question. And you have to be [level] with them, that yes, you'll have to. There's no way we can guarantee that when I leave your home now the police won't come and want to know what we discussed. You had lots of spies.

When you say you'd approach people on certain issues, how did you select the issues? Do you mean general issues like bantustans, or more specific issues?

It was largely the bantustans, because more than any other issue people were gradually being sold on the issue. It was an issue that preoccupied us, apart from other issues that were topical at the time.

Were people being given documents and citizenship?

Exactly. On the citizenship issue we had to move in very fast and silently, so that we make it an issue. They were issuing certificates. We would go to the hostels and talk to the people there, that look, these things are not good. Because some of them were being misled by being told that once you get your citizenship certificate you won't have to carry your dompas any more. And we'd tell them that there's nothing like that. If you take that certificate, it's like saying that you're accepting that this country doesn't belong to you. And you're not entitled to come and work here. You would say those things. Mundane issues. The certificate says [you must be a migrant, away from your family.] They'd say, but I want to vote. And you'd say no, you are voting to be in that bantustan, not voting to rule the country or change anything. [Some took the certificates and left their passes, but were being arrested anyway.]

What were some of the other big issues?

There would be bus boycotts, the cost of living. We hadn't gone deeply, but we were going to go into the workers' issues.

Your resources were very few. How did you select your targets or select the people you wanted to try to recruit?

Like I said, the hostels were where you would find a large concentration of people. It took some time. You couldn't just [succeed] on the first day. My own kind of approach, which was a bit of a novel approach, was to go around selling softwares. When Mthuli Shezi met me I was doing that to earn a living. I had ample time at my disposal. I had contacts from my selling experience. You [engage people in chats] and gradually you move around to the real issues.

I remember there was a mine issue that affected workers in 1974 — Carletonville. The president and myself went out to Carletonville, I think on the train. We talked to people there, gave them the lowdown, how we view the situation. Unfortunately the time was too short. We had about eighteen months, then boom! We had the Frelimo [rallies] thing.

When you were approaching hostel dwellers, did you just leave aside the black consciousness explanations and get right to the bread and butter issues?

No. It was an interpretation of black consciousness. In fact, you know, you have to speak the languages. I can't go and speak to any black person without finding common ground on the black experience, their experience as black people, the lives they lead. It just automatically comes out. They would say we are oppressed, these foreigners are oppressing us. You normally would argue around that and say but how can we solve that? They'd say but even the great ones like the Mandelas failed to solve that and they are in prison. Then you'd say but they haven't failed because they never tried. They failed because you have not supported their efforts. It's for you also now to be involved. And people [would volunteer. Everybody knew they had no money, but they would volunteer.]

And we would go around to rural areas, go in with projects. Even before Black Community Programmes. Not very extensively, but— . We would always work together with SASO [which would initiate projects, then draw in non-students]. There was the Winterveld project, and in Natal they had projects they were involved in. Some literacy projects were included. We concentrated on initiating some things in the hostels, but we never managed to get out. We ended up drawing budget proposals and not getting funding for that.

[SASO was better established, better organized and funded.] The IUEF [International University Exchange Fund] among others used to fund it quite enormously. So they had projects both in rural areas and in townships. Vacation jobs — though those were discontinued because they tended to give the wrong impression of what SASO is all about. But the idea was that students must be involved in "vac jobs". So that they could have the experience of what it was like to have— . And running classes, bridging classes —

and community projects. [I wouldn't be able to count a particular number, but students were involved everywhere. Federal Theological Seminary, Fort Hare, wherever.]

One BPC program in Cape Town in 1973-74 was about housing. Between yards there used to be corridors. Now they started building houses in the corridors, very crowded. And we went on a campaign opposing that thing in Bonteheuvel. I remember I was liaising with one colleague of mine in Cape Town, Steve Carolus. We would bring pamphlets — but we didn't have the resources to really move in and enroll the people in this.

Did you ever have a phenomenon like the narodnik period in Russia where elite and urban young people wanted to go "back to the people" and become peasants themselves, to try to identify in a romantic way with the "real" masses?

A back-to-nature sort of thing? No, not really. What we had in SASO, but which we didn't encourage, was people who tended to be neglectful, who neglected themselves, went with unkempt hair. It was a statement of defiance more than anything, a rebellion against authoritarianism.

That was before reggae hairstyles.

Long before that. Also people let their beards grow. It was another way of saying we don't want to be gentlemen. And we are so busy in the struggle that there's no time to shave. But there was never any idea that we should "peasantify" ourselves. It was just that people realised that because of the forces at play and the background our parents had come from, the way we've been put down by this oppression, and again the rebellion against this white tutelage which was obtaining under NUSAS and the University Christian Movement — all those forces together made people realise that they wanted to take the most radical stance. And unfortunately when that was taken, it was quite a quantum leap, as it were, and other people were left behind.

It was always a source of concern among students, in SASO particularly, that we mustn't leave the masses behind. Hence we need to form an organization that they can relate to. You couldn't have SASO speaking on behalf of my parents, and so on.

After the 1976 uprising, people looked back and pointed to the failure of SASO and the BCM to integrate workers into their planning and organizing. Is that a valid criticism, and if so why was that true?

It's not valid. I don't know where people have picked that up. It's a recent analysis, maybe of two or three years back.

There's a book by Baruch Hirson called *Year of Fire***—**

Year of Ash. It's banned here. But I've read it. It's not true. We always tried to show this. You've got a catalogue with all those documents. We've been involved with the workers. What happened was that when we got onto the scene, people were in trade unions but they were in these multiracial trade unions, the TUCSA [Trade Union Council of SA] kind of thing. They didn't even understand trade unionism. Except they would always see on their pay slip that there's a deduction. The involvement with trade unions wasn't there.

When we got onto the scene, SASO initiated the Black Workers' Project, to involve the black workers. We said we must form them into unions. Then there was a difference of opinion, because at the time we had BAWU, which originally was the Salesmen and Allied Workers Union. Shop clerks and that kind of a thing, middle class, quite limited. We said let's make it more broad. We renamed it "Black Allied Workers Union". It became a general union rather than a craft-type union. At the same time there was the idea that we need to form industrial unions. And BAWU was arguing that how do you form industrial unions? Drake Koka was saying, let workers join BAWU.

Was this before the Durban strikes?

All before the Durban strikes basically. It's 1972 when Sales and Allied Workers Union changes to BAWU, and when BPC was being established. And it spread out. Because it was also confined to Joburg.

But at the time SASO was already involved in the field of workers, workers' education, workers' rights. And the need to belong to worker structures.

What was the origin of the Salesmen and Allied Workers Union?

Drake Koka was involved. He started that. Because he was involved in the Liberal Party, so that's his background.

Was he a salesman?

He's a man of all parts. The problem that SASO had with Drake was that Drake would never do anything without referring to his white counterparts. He had some attachments with whites, even the background that he came from, the Liberal Party. Whenever he'd want to initiate, he'd always check it — that kind of a thing.

Because he was going to ask them for money?

Exactly. Money apart from other things. And like "I'm thinking of starting this thing; will you endorse it if I go forward?" That's where he'd fight with SASO. There was a big internal strife between BAWU and the Black Workers Project. We never ended up resolving it. He wanted to have this workers project submerged under BAWU, and some of us felt that was not necessary.

SASO had already started moving. In fact in Durban the strikes happened — Black Workers Project was active among those factories and those workers.

Industry by industry?

Just in a general sense. A training (?) group kind of a situation, Black Workers Project was involved. But then you had this Bolton group which came in as well, the Bolton Hall grouping. And you had these NUSAS Industrial Aid Society people coming in as well. [I can't say in any detail how each was involved before the strikes began or for how long.] The Bolton group was involved with workers from about '72, and '73 came the first bannings. Now the banning went all round, included BPC and SASO people and NUSAS people. When that started, they got worried. And at the same time the militancy of the workers was coming up. The Bolton Hall group was operating in Durban, the Jenny Curtises, University of Natal people. They started these aid societies for workers. And at the same time the Black Workers Project was also involved there. People were already gaining militancy because black consciousness was coming in.

Was there rivalry between the black group and the whites?

No, not really. But our attitude was that whites had no business organizing blacks. We would say [to workers] why must you wait to be told by those whites that you are oppressed? You are oppressed, you are workers, you can strike. And when the bannings came, people like Bokwe Mafuna — he was one of the people involved with the Black Workers Project — it meant people like that were in the back. There was always replacement material, and the Welile Nhlapos moved in, the Tebogo Mafoles [?] moved in. These were some of the people who then left in the early '70s, 1974 just prior to the Frelimo rallies. They left the country. Some of them joined the ANC, others the BCM. Mafuna is now with the French broadcasting service.

The banning affected the Black Workers Project. It couldn't carry out [what it wanted to.] The workers were already militant at that time. Then the government hit out. It went for the Bolton group. A lot of whites were deported, some whites. Some were church people, some were dual-citizen nationals. There was a clampdown, like when the government doesn't really know who was responsible. It just throws around [a net] and it hopes whoever is caught, even in the crossfire, would be—

If you compare the general efficiency of the security forces in the mid-'70s with what things were like when you came out in the 1980s, how do they compare?

They were not that efficient [in the mid-1970s.] Now they are quite sophisticated. Now they even have intellectuals among their fold. They can come and discuss with you very nicely, they say we're not going to use brute force, you know.

Like the thing in the *Weekly Mail* last week where the man said he would be able to show a book on management from the Harvard Business School that explained—

Yah. They are now quite sophisticated. But then you just had a situation where they pulled kids from the countryside. They'd say "I've got you, and I know you are doing something but I don't know what you're doing, but I'm going to make sure that you tell me!" Now they've got university people in the force. And you've got this State Security Council; they exchange views with the international community and they get ideas from that.

I've been constantly struck on this trip, and in the 'eighties generally, with the growth of this feeling that procedures have to be democratic. That leaders can't decide things without consulting with their rank and file, their committees; that there has to be a mandate. Was that kind of thing already brewing in the SASO-BPC period?

Yes, it was already there. When you look at the structures that we had—

. . . SASO meetings seemed marked by very strict adherence to procedural formalities — motions, resolutions and votes, etc. Where does that come from? I don't think meetings in the 'fifties were conducted in this way. . .

Yes, leaders [would make announcements] and people would just clap hands.

It's the same situation that one comes across in the trade unions, because there you've got workers from the '50s and '60s. Now they believe that you as a secretary, as an official, you must come with ideas, with campaigns, you are the trade union. Then you say, but I am not the union, you are the union. I'm only a functionary of the union.

You know democracy has become tedious for people, because they never were used to it. We say now that we've come together, let's hammer this thing out. Employers are saying they're retrenching in three weeks time or in a month's time. We must come with solutions. Let's look; have they satisfied certain conditions in order to do that? [They discuss, then we say] okay, let's go take these views back. You go to management, you come back. You say [to the workers] I'm not going to be the one affected by this; you are going to be, so you must decide.

I think our grounding was very much democratic in the sense that we got sensitive to anything being done without consulting with us.

I can see how that arises in a trade union, but in student politics or BPC politics, where does it come from? Is it just a generational thing — that somehow people are born after 1950 —?

Maybe partly generational. But what used to happen — we used to also have "formation schools," leadership training seminars. So in all these things, we used to work on them. How to run a meeting, how to write minutes, all those things you get trained in. So you don't just get trained and end it there; you must go and implement that. And naturally when you get to a meeting, you always have to say — we always used to say — you can't decide for the people, you must decide with the people. That was one of the expressions we used to carry out.

Maybe you just came into an organization where that was already the convention, but I'm searching for the origins of that, because it seems like such a departure from the 1950s. Like in a formation school. Did you ever attend one? Can you describe one?

Yes. They would vary. The theme — let's say maybe black consciousness and what does it mean to us? Maybe relating it to theology. I'm just using that as an example. Then you'd go into that, and look at ways of making it effective, how even can you be in your field, if you do theology. And you'd engage in what we used to call participatory democracy, where you'd have commissions. We've got this idea, but it's an idea of a few. Let's send it among a larger group of representatives. We'd go to the formation schools and hold commissions, discussion groups, basically you get a theme, a topic, you approach it from various corners, you come back, plenary, you all report. So you hammer it together, you come up with an idea.

When you learn that you're not all informed on the issue, you commission a certain group to go and investigate this further, and come back and report. Consult people who are in the know, consult others in rural areas, go in with projects. Even before Black Community Programmes. Not very extensively, but—. We would always work together with SASO [which would initiate projects, then draw in non-students]. There was the Winterveld project, and in Natal they had projects they were involved in. Literac y, this kind of a thing. So you'd go to formation schools, you'd come back, having been involved in that sort of a thing. When there's an idea, if you're not clear, you can either have a workshop, a seminar, or have a consultation; already this gives you the idea that anything that is done in the name of the community has to follow a certain process.

So you arrived on the scene in student politics and found this already a fait accompli?

Yes, it was there already. The student movement we stared with, it was sort of debating sessions, debating clubs. There was some element of procedure that was already known. You can't talk at length without focusing on your point. So you come back to those things. Some of it may also come naturally. People naturally can express themselves, and they say here's a topic, let's move into it; you go hammer and tongs and at the end of the day you come up with certain ideas.

Is there any sense in which this is a shift culturally, where the old style was a more authoritarian method, more consistent with the type of society where age and experience gave one the authority to dictate to people? Whereas by your generation, younger people were so much more educated than their parents, this had sort of broken down?

There already is some element of cultural break with tradition in the sense that there was an element of alienation between the youth in one generation and the elderly people in another generation. Alienation in the sense that when you look at all the evils and all the ills in society, you ask yourself, these things have been happening for so many years, why did the elders let it happen? Then there's this alienation. They let it happen because they thought it was okay. And you sound other people out. It was a process that developed in learning. I wouldn't pinpoint it to a particular period, but everybody tended to develop those things, as you get onto the scene.

We got into SASO, SASO already had standing rules of how to conduct business. Where they got that from, I don't know. But it was already there.

The University Christian Movement had these formal procedures, commissions, minutes, even what they called "formation schools." And several of the SASO founders had been involved in UCM.

Yah. Okay. Barney [Pityana], Chris Mokoditoa. Maybe. Because the seedbed of SASO is the UCM and NUSAS, basically. And closer to UCM than to NUSAS. But what I want to posit to you is that if that is the case, I don't know how you're going to explain with the elderly generation, because the UCM is also steeped in church litany.

Maybe, but really it looks to me like a very thinly veiled political organization, just with a few trappings—

Alright, fine. But what I'm trying to get at is that the elderly people were more in the church situation. The church situation has got a preacher, and he preaches down, and there are no questions back at him. That generation accepted that kind of a thing, without questioning. But the younger generation came with questioning minds, questioning quite a number of things, and I think whenever they found an avenue or a forum where they could readily question certain things and discuss freely, I think they would develop that into what it became, their own, and then move from there.

So I can't pinpoint and say where it started, but there were already these norms and practices. That you don't take any decision, you have to consult.

Even in the formation of BPC, SASO went out and consulted all over the country. It said, look, we're having this thing, but we're concerned that older people aren't involved. We think we should launch such an organization. And there was quite some opposition from some camps. The ANC camp wasn't keen on starting a political organization; they felt the time was not right yet.

Including people outside?

No, inside [the country]. Well, I don't know how far or extensive the consultation was. But you go for leading people whom you know at one time or another (were ANC). Students went out, throughout the country, they were consulting. And they came back and said the greater majority are for it, although they're skeptical about it. But others say it's a no-no, that it can't be formed.

Even after the banning of the BPC, with the forming of AZAPO, the same tradition. People went out again, and others felt (the same). Partly it's the selfish fear that they may just not be the main players on the scene.

I'm still on this thing about democratic procedures. If you take SASO as one school for that, and the trade union movement as another, are those two independent strains that come together in the '80s, or is one a derivative of the other? Does the trade union movement owe something to the student movement in this respect?

I think from my analysis it would be slightly independently derived foundations of how to run their affairs. But obviously there is always the element of influence, from the predessesors. Like you have those student groups coming before, and there's an element of influence in the sense that they were preaching a break against old traditions. So when old traditions were there, and people were moving in with this enthusiasm from the student movement, they would naturally question it, because even in the trade unions — the ones we are having today — they're quite questioning.

They're questioning a number of things, unlike the trade unions of the TUCSA mold, where the general secretary would decide, the executive would decide, so many things about the union. And the workers would just say okay, like I said earlier on. They'd only be able to see that there's a deduction. But how that money's used, and for what, it would never be felt they had to have a say. Now with the involvement of people like us in trade unions, I mean the youth, they've infused the idea to people that look, you must question how your money is spent. It's your money.

Then there's now the talk of worker control and worker democracy. Those are concepts that are being peddled to people. And people are buying it. Okay, some are going to excesses about what worker control really means. I wouldn't attribute it to that. At the same time I would not say it's exclusively independent. Somewhere there's some influence coming in.

I want to ask you about your prison experience. You get to Robben Island mid-1976?

December '76.

Up to that time you were held—

In Pretoria.

What can you tell me about what you learned on Robben Island? It was 5 years?

Five years. I just got a break of remission of one day, because we got released on a Saturday when it was supposed to be Sunday. Let me put it broadly. It was quite an experience. Certain myths were dispelled, and certain holy cows, if there were any, also destroyed. Also, it became a shocking experience in that people did not live up to our expectations. Let me be blunt.

Do you mean the older generation of prisoners?

Before we came in — we were the first of the younger generation to be on the island. They were all the older generation. In fact, they were all there from the '60s. We were the first group that came in in the '70s and in large numbers. Then followed by an avalanche of the post-'76, post-June '76 people.

What about the [Sotomela] Ndukwana group from Healdtown?

OK, five of them. Also, you had the Eric Molobi trial, Molobi and 2 other guys. And Amos Masondo, the NAYO trial. I see you have Ramotse. We buried him about three years back, an ANC guy.

And Masebudi Mangena got five years in 1973.

Yes, he is the first one of the black consciousness movement on the island. He stayed there for three years without anybody. He was a loner. Then we were the first significant group to come in, drawn from the leadership.

But it was partly a disappointing experience. People never lived up to our expectations. Remember we were charged partly for eulogizing them, calling them our leaders, denigrating the bantustan leaders, and saying our leaders are on Robben Island.

But you meet them and they don't match expectations. We got into the prison situation. We came with our vibrant militancy and our outright defiance after our two year stay in Pretoria. We were arrested 1974 — I was detained in October '74 — I had managed to evade the police for one month. I went underground, produced a lot of literature, printed documents, keeping people informed about what happened. The Frelimo thing was initiated in Durban in September 1974. Because on 25th September 1974 Frelimo was to be given token custodianship of the country. Here in Joburg we were only liaising (with Durban).

Some of us had felt it was not really the proper time to do that. We were thinking of the following year in April, or when Frelimo fully takes over. So there was a bit of ambivalence. Anyway, the Durban people were organizing it and head office was here; and they had gone ahead and sent people out to Mozambique. They wanted to get [Joachim] Chissano or someone from there. We sent young people, and they made them talk to Chissano. But they were worried about their security, because the boers had made threats. And how could students protect them? So we were supposed to organize other rallies here in the region.

We said okay, but you didn't consult us properly. But we said we'll try our best, but we can't promise much here in Joburg. There was a demonstration organized at Turfloop. They wanted us to go down to join them in Durban, but we said no, we'd rather go to there, but we got there after it was over. When we got there they got wind we were around and we were detained.

I was locked up. But I managed to get out the following morning. And now we're debating about things like—. They wanted me to write a statement and I was refusing. I said why should I write a statement? I'm not in detention. Are you detaining me or not? We were quite defiant against authority, and we knew the law. You can't just take me in for anything. We had this whole historical background. You get arrested for a passbook, for not doing anything. So you have this resistance. So I say if you arrest me, it must be a policeman who is trying to arrest you. So then we argued the whole day. Then this guy went away and consulted and he phoned and he came back, and then he just kept me there in the charge office, then the following day they released me. They took my particulars and why I came there and so on. So I had to cook a story, that I heard that the university is closing and I've come to pick up people and take them home. They said fine, go. They realized later, hey! Your released this man? You should have taken him. But I was already gone.

So when we got back [to Johannesburg] we heard that people had been detained here and there, and we had to go underground. I started writing a lot of circulars out to people, keeping them informed of developments and so on. Then they started looking for me heavy, and I had to sleep here and there. With the limited resources one couldn't move very far. So exactly a month later, 25th October, I was detained.

I remember that day because it was the day that this present Pik Botha who was the UN Ambassador was asking for six months more (and the world will see—) And it's how many years now? (laughter)

Now they're more realistic. They want five years.

So that's when I was detained, October 25, 1974. So two years and a couple of months (until we went to Robben Island).

Did they charge you immediately?

No, they detained us; your family can't see you, your lawyer can't see you, and they interrogate you. They want you to tell them who organized the rallies; where are the arms; who went for training; who went to contact those people; why? So now when you've got those people you want to start a revolution in the country, and all those things. You've got to (adjust?) for that period.

They wanted to charge you but they didn't have enough hard evidence.

But they ended up producing the documents and they said in studying these documents there's reasonable grounds to infer that these people would have — whatever they were preaching would have led to a revolution. Well, we argued against that, but what happened was that when '76 happened, we were still on trial. It sealed our fate. Because now all the prosecutor had to say was look, this was our conspiracy to mobilize people and build up to this. So we had to keep on [insisting] no, it's not that. People had to decide for themselves how they go about it. Which to a large extent was true; but we had to guide them. But look, you can't then decide and say— . If someone said "I'm going to a bantustan," even if you'd told them about the uselessness of bantustans—

So when we got onto the island — or the two years we had stayed [in Pretoria] we had fought this whole war. When we got onto the island we had this militancy and there was nothing to stop us. We got there and we found that these people whom we looked up to as our leaders — that was in the days of the black power salute — that was the only thing also — we went to greet them, and people were sheepishly [cringing]. And we [thought] what's happening here?

So when we were being admitted we went through the corridor, you know they literally turned their backs on us and faced the wall. Now that is a practice that's being enforced in these prisons, because we have what's called the common law — those who for theft or whatever. So those are supposed not to see us or interact with us. But we would always manage to find a way to talk to them.

So we got to the island and expected to find militant people, leaders who could guide us.

And who would congratulate you for what you had done.

Exactly. But gee! They were subdued. We said hey, what's the problem? What's happening to these people? We didn't expect that from political prisoners. We do read snippets about political prisoners in other countries, and I mean they stand their ground.

So we said maybe it's because those were criminals, we thought. But we later learned that criminals are kept in another section, far from this one.

There are also criminal prisoners on Robben Island?

Yah, but they are only there to man the harbors and do the cleaning in the houses of the prison warders. They are in a completely separate prison wing.

So when we got onto the scene and repopularized the fist and greeting, what happened is people were scared to talk to us. So when they'd see us — there's a prison command that you face the wall. So they would turn and face the wall. But that was not what we'd expected — the black man we had always eulogized now turning his back on us. You know, that kind of thing.

So we then had to embark on a defiance now of the warders. We would say hey, black style [fist up], and they'd say "keep quiet." And we'd say there's nothing wrong in greeting— . We started popularizing that and they told us to stop. We said no, this is our form of greeting. Is there any harm in greeting? They'd say no, there's no harm. We'd say, it's just like you do your salutation, this is what we do. So they accepted that. We scored a victory.

Then we moved it a step further. We extended it to the handshakes with the fellow prisoners. [The African handshake with grasping of thumbs.] This prolongs the contact, we'd tell someone you mustn't rush it. Look, you are doing your time here, twenty-five years; why are you rushing your greeting? So that became the kind of salutation.

What was the point of it?

To restore their dignity. Basically it's like they're being looked after by young boys, eighteen year olds who bark at them and so on. And they would jump. It's heartrending to see someone the age of your father being submissive.

The point was to make your own rules.

Exactly. So that's when we popularized the greeting where you lock hands, you see; you prolong the period of greeting and you thereby get more time to just interchange some few pleasantries with that person.

You do this in the exercise period?

No, you see the prison is divided into various sections. So maybe we'd be coming from one section to the administration bloc, maybe to collect money or to sign for money, or maybe to the hospital wing or whatever. So you'd meet people in the corridors, and you'd say fine, this is the only chance, you'd give your name quickly and say who are you? He says his name, you say "amandla!" [power], and you pass. You give each other courage, that look, we are all in the same boat, and you can't be worrying.

So then we looked at the conditions [in the prison] and said we had to drastically alter these conditions. We tried to exchange ideas, and most of [the responses] were negative. We've tried that; you won't succeed. You are on the island, you're locked up, and so on. So we embarked on some hunger strikes alone.

After how many weeks or months of this—

Maybe after some six months or so. In fact, the first action that we took, interestingly enough — we used to read a lot, so there were some books that were written discussing the situation on Robben Island. Then we had already prepared ourselves, like working in the lime quarry, stone quarry. So we had already prepared for that. So when we got the bit that in prison you can't answer back, you just get ordered and you [obey]. So we came and the first thing we said is hey, we're not sentenced to hard labor. Ours was a corrective [sentence], the judge said, so that like-minded people would not do the same. It was a deterrent. The judge made it clear that we are not criminals. So why must you force us to work?

So the first resistance was when we managed to break this question of working in the quarry. So it was no longer a question of early morning you wake up and you go there. We had to change the order of things, and embark even on hunger strikes even to have certain changes effected.

Other people felt no, they wouldn't join us in the hunger strike. Gradually we went on like that.

How many people joined you?

Very few, very few. Toivo ya Toivo did join us. Because there was a time when we were removed from the main section into another section where we were just opposite the Toivos, the Mandelas, the Sisulus and everybody. We used to smuggle notes to each other, exchange notes.

Was this within six months of your arrival?

Maybe within nine months. We didn't stay long in the open section. So we were [put] down there, because they realized that this is the leadership that's the poison, the SASO poison. They would call us the "SASO poison," the SASO Nine. So they moved us, we joined them, so we explained to them that this is the situation, we find it so untenable. Young people, they called the older people by their first names; it's culturally wrong for us in our upbringing. I can't come and say "hey, Gail..."

You mean the warders called them by first names?

Yes, and they respond by saying "meneer"—which is "mister." In fact when we got in, they were calling them "baas" [boss].

Really?

Yes! There was a group that was calling them "baas." We said okay, what's wrong? Then that was changed to "meneer." That kind of thing. It's all those kind of experiences which shatter you. But we never wrote them off. We just felt they need to be won all over again.

What about vocabulary? When you used the word "black," did they object to your usage?

They tried initially. There was some resistance, others felt no, black was a way— . We had to explain what we mean by black, and they would understand; but they would still feel [hesitation], "why 'black,'" why

that? In fact they would throw back at us these racial connotations. And we would tell them "but this is not [racist]." We would give a whole anthropological dissertation about races basically, and end up showing that, after all, races are man-made. It's only for man's convenience that he classifies the Caucasoid, the Mongoloids, and so on. There's only one human race at the end of the day. To sound esoteric you can start doing all those things; but we are not being racist. We are merely confronting a racial situation as a group that is experiencing the same oppression or deprivation as we are. And we operate from that basis, but there's nothing racist about it.

So they would be uncomfortable with "black," but later others started using "black." But they were using it as the government was peddling it, because the government later on started using "black," as a substitution for "Bantu," you see. Not the broader definition. Others would still say, "no, I'm a coloured." And we'd say that's not the correct way to view yourself. So we tried. And that was the situation.

Did you ever make any converts among the older generation?

Sympathizers, really, more than anything. And I think the ties — it was really with campaigns that we used to get the people siding with us, others would agree and say no, the youth is correct.

Because they'd always treat us as youth. We would always correct them and say look, we may be young in age, but our organization is on par as your organization. It's not a youth organization. It's a political organization. So it must be accorded the same status. There's no youth political organization as it were. It's just one political organization. But there would be resistance. And naturally, people always wanted us to be submerged under them. And we'd resist that naturally, and so on.

So when the Barney Pityanas started all the unity talks [in 1979], we were following them, people would be coming in and we would get to know [interruption]

. . . looking at it broadly now, you find that people would like to settle for sort of a quick fix solution. It's understandable, given that people have been there for twenty years or so. The first enthusiasm and thrust for which they had hope, that they'd be liberated in five years time — when they realize the reality, that it cannot happen — you understand why people are thinking like that.

And it's not surprising that a few years back people were now opting for this conditional release. You renounce violence and then you get out.

Were they offering this in that period when you were there?

Yes, they were and we rejected— . In fact they started then. Some people [bought?] and they'd come back and we'd say, no, you can't. We were quite vociferous against that. So that now it was being tested. And we said no, we can't accept that, definitely.

Others felt that we are saying so because we are doing shorter periods, five years. We said no, even if we were doing longer. It's the principle more than anything. It's not so much the term of imprisonment that you are doing.

So it came up later, and people were now for it, particularly those who were doing life. And then they did that.

When you got there in December 1976, how much knowledge did people inside have about what had happened from June up to December?

Not much, not much, really. In fact we had a lot of briefings with people, explaining to them, the first six months.

What sort of questions did they ask? Can you remember?

Okay, they would ask how did it start? Was it spontaneous? You know, they would try and show that it's spontaneous. And we'd say no, there's nothing spontaneous in any revolutionary situation, and we'd trace it to various situations, SASM meetings, SASO meeting. It only happened that Afrikaans was an issue then. It could have been anything. It was a whole volatile situation building up in the country.

Others would try to justify that it was their organization in exile; you know, that kind of a thing. And you'd just explain that this is the situation, how things unfolded, and it would go on like that.

Now let's come back to that group, the [Stone] Sizanis and them. They came in earlier, and when they came in. Okay, prison is bad, literally bad; it's a situation of deprivation. Now what was happening was there was a system of classification where you were group A, B, C, D. If you are in A you can get cigarettes, food, biscuits and sweets; B and so on, extra number of letters and visits, and D is the lowest. So some of us rejected that kind of classification. We said we don't want to be classified. Just treat us as a prisoner, whether it's A or D. We are going to fight toward changing the situation so that there's no differentiation. We are all prisoners. Why should there be differentiation? If there's to be a privilege, we all get it. And we'd argue that information is a right, it's not a privilege. We need to be informed. We are political prisoners. This was an ongoing, annual battle.

So now we rejected that classification, and when people got in there they found there was classification. The A group would buy sweets and so on, and they would use those to bribe people to join their organization. And our organization never had those delicacies. So we could never bribe a lot of the youth!

So these people, this group [the Healdtown Five] came in, and they were caught in that charade of saying look— . They would bring those things, and you can't reject that when you are first-time arriving. Later on you realize that no, there were strings attached to that kind of a gift. So that went on, and they told them that actually you boys don't understand. You were belonging to the overt AZASM, but we had this other underground AZASM.

SASM?

SASM, I'm sorry. We had this underground SASM, which is generating all these programs. That is why you went in, you see, and you did not know. So others were caught into that thing.

If you read through their trial though, it seems they actually believed they were joining the ANC when they were trying to go out of the country.

Exactly, this is the thing. You see the elderly people they call you in, you relate how you are doing these things, and they say(?) yes exactly, this is the underground SASM you're supposed to belong to. And that's why naturally you're going to go to— . So they are caught in this thing.

But fortunately Masebudi [Mangena] was there. He said no, but there's nothing like that. There was no underground SASM; there was only one SASM. And it went on for about a year or two.

Because what used to happen there on Robben Island, when you get in there, there was the PAC, the ANC, then when Masebudi came there he held the flag for the BCM. So now whoever had to come in now had to declare allegiance to one of the two, and the BCM wasn't there. They would dismiss it and say there's no BCM. What is that? That one-man thing?

So when we came in in '76 they now had to sing a different tune. That's when they started changing and saying yes, you belong to the "underground SASM," or the "militant wing," you know, that kind of thing.

Anyone who comes in must owe allegiance. And when he's owed allegiance to any one of the three, he's respected, he's not touched. So the older people, when the youth came in, they realized that and they went on a rampage, recruiting them, just throwing them in.

And we'd argue and say look, the great majority of these people come from organizations we had formed, the black consciousness movement. So it's not proper for you to now start destabilizing and moving them from their political home.

"Destabilizing"? Was that the term you used at the time?

Okay, but what we were talking about is recruitment. If someone has indicated [an allegiance] you just have to leave him. If you recruit you are undermining the structure he belongs to.

And elderly people appreciated things we had done, especially the black consciousness movement. They would always everyday remind us, "You really had the scene (?). We had women's organizations; we had

students' organizations; we had youth organizations; we had cultural organizations; we had trade unions. So we were diffused in the whole country.

So they appreciated that, so much so that with the emergence of the UDF, we couldn't be surprised. And they looked and they did exactly the same thing we had done. They formed them; they [the UDF] closed options for anything that is BC. So they would say no, and never support anything, and they would do us down. But that was the situation then.

What about your group of nine, when you emerged at the end of the five or six years? You weren't as tight-knit a group as when you went in.

We lost one. He was in the Delmas trial, [Patrick Mosiuoa] Lekota. Otherwise the rest remain.

He was the only one?

In fact what happened is he had gone to conduct surreptitious correspondence with Mandela directly. And we felt he was compromising us, because we would sit as a group, as a movement, and formulate ideas. And when he was writing, he didn't report to the movement that look, I am exchanging correspondence with the person. It was a surreptitious thing. And we felt it was a betrayal. This was after nine months or so, pretty soon after we were there.

I was in charge of the communications within the nine. Well, we had grown much larger than the nine. But we, the nine, were thrown into one wing. Then we had another group which was in another wing, a post-'76 group of people. Younger people. Molobi [or Morobe?]. He was also in our fold. But what was happening was that the ANC was actively recruiting, daily, and there was a lot of bribery. Sweets, biscuits would be used.

And financial aid. They'd come and say "how are things at home. Are they struggling?" and so on. "Okay, we'll help you." Then you throw in a word or two, what's good about [your organization]. So people were being won over, by good or foul means.

Financially people inside could direct people outside regarding help to families? Through visitors?

Yes. They had their network. People were then sent out.

Do you have any particular explanation for Lekota's defection?

Well, the seeds of it could be seen during our trial period. He already visualized himself being on the island, subservient to—

The true leaders.

Exactly. He was already telling himself — he never put himself on a par with them — okay, not necessarily on a par with them, but as his equals in terms of contribution to the struggle. So he always put himself out there.

And it's not only him, but, probably the atmosphere under which you operated as the black consciousness movement. We would always encourage people not to take sides, with either of the two groups. And we would not allow people to criticize these groups openly, give the fact that people would not discuss these older movements in the country. And you know the fear that people had. So we would always try to project them as legitimate groups within the society.

So now people wouldn't look at it beyond that, that this is to popularize them within the community. But we've got our own program, and we need to sustain this. And for us to make them come together we need to always say to them, look let's please preach this thing: remove your differences and come together. But they would never— .

So like I said, the seeds of his defection were already here.

Did you ever see the BCM as a caretaker movement? That you would take care of things while they [ANC and PAC] were unable to, and then when the time was right you would not step aside, but you would all merge into one thing? Or did you see them as a spent force while you were the growing thing?

Maybe later, as you interacted with them, you came to realize that notion taking root, that it seems they have lost direction more than anything. But originally we visualized ourselves as a catalyst force that would try and bring them together, for whatever it is worth, and operate as one front, united front. Because we knew that also within the BCM we had people who were PAC, others ANC, one or the other. And we would say look, there's even more than just the PAC and ANC; there are other groupings. They may be inactive right now, but there are other groupings. So it would be dangerous to decide now and say look we are going— . But we would try and work with them. And we would preach the whole concept of unity in action, limited as it was. Because those were banned and we were active.

So we saw ourselves as a catalyst force trying to bring those together. But maybe it was a bit of idealism. Ideally we would see it, but we practically didn't go like that. [chuckle]. Yah.

You said Lekota was already seeing himself as a disciple of these mythical leaders. Is that a personality thing, that he has to be hero-worshipping a leader?

Well, to some extent, yes. During our trial he used to hero-worship Biko. Very much. Everything he would do, all mannerisms and everything, even manner of talking. You could just see Biko.

Then when he moved onto the island, then there were those people and he just moved onto them and he clutched them.

After Biko died.

It was after then.

Was that a turning point for all of you?

I wouldn't say so, but like I say the seeds were already here. Biko, well and good; he gave a testimony [at our trial], and he was going to remain there. But the people he was visualizing himself interacting with were still there. So maybe it was a question of a crisis of allegiance. Now, this man I'm leaving, I'll be for the next— . In fact, we were bargaining for twelve years, or even longer. Or even before we reached the consecutive [or concurrent sentences] aspect. When they were saying there's conspiracy; about eight of us were on the conspiracy charge. Going by experience of the past trials in the sixties, it used to be no less than twelve years. So we'd say twelve years more. We had already given ourselves — that look we're going in for a long time. When five years came, we said well and good.

So I think the crisis of allegiance, when he realized that look, I'll be going away for a long time; so those people I'll be in contact with will be those, so I might as well move in like that. But it's more of his personality. And anyway it's my speculation; he may have better reasons why.

At one meeting where we called him in by the beach, we had to call him in and say look — because he was against us, opposing any move. He wanted us every time to take the same stance, the same move as the other groupings. And we'd say no, we are an organization, a movement, we're going to take our own independent stance, and then relate it to that of others.

And one of the things he used to have against us was that he is shocked that we're talking now of a military wing. And his understanding is that we are not supposed to form a military wing; we are supposed to take people and groom them, conscientize them, and then they can decide on their own which one to... and we said no, that is not revolution. That is maybe caretaker, *stokvel* [co-operative], that kind of thing.

The rest of you had adopted the view that BCM had to establish an external wing?

Yes, definitely. I mean, realizing some of the faults of the people— We were now interacting with the trained people; they would come in, the way they were being arrested, we realized they were all playing— . Clearly, we can't pride ourselves that we have got an external military wing that is going to come at some

point and contribute to our liberation, when they do these things. It was very amateurish. In fact some of them even admitted "When we went for training, we were not being trained to take over the country. We were being trained to take a gun, take aim, and shoot. That's all.

And like I said, when we were reading the literature and realizing some of the things they were doing — I mean, we came to terms with the fact that the ANC's launching of the military wing was not to take over the country, but to instill fear in the whites so the white government can quickly run to the negotiation table.

So we've always been clear about that, that it's not been on their agenda to liberate this country, but to force these people to come to the negotiating table. So people don't realize that. They get caught up with the revolutionary literature that goes about, that okay, revolutions go like this, that the Vietnam experiences, the Chinese experience. Then they want to transpose that and say this is how it's going to happen in this country.

Insurrection.

Exactly. And that is not the situation. The ANC mainly wants to hit those targets and say "come to the table, otherwise we're going to produce more."

Right now [1989] we're caught in the vortex of a negotiated settlement. And they believe they'll spark enough bombs to bring this government to negotiate. The government is going to be negotiating from a position of strength. Anyway, that will be a different topic completely.

Maybe one question we didn't handle was the coming in of the Unity Movement or Cape Action League?

Let's come back to that. But just before we leave the experience of Robben Island, was there a plan for when you came out, your group of eight? Was there a step by step program of what to do?

No, it's quite easy to answer that one. Keeping abreast, though limited, of developments in the country, through literature — we'd smuggle in newspapers, and get reports. Okay, there's a black consciousness movement, the bannings, Steve's death, so we kept abreast of developments. So that when AZAPO was formed, it was a logical decision to identify with active black consciousness groupings. So that was the decision, that we would move into it. And we identified with it, all of us, to a man. We may not necessarily be all in the same position of being active.

The people who are less active are Nkwenkwe Nkomo—

Nkomo largely. (Gilbert) Sedibe was involved with AZAPO in some sections, some unions, but now he's inactive, completely inactive now.

Aubrey Mokoape?

He's running a medical practice. But he's involved with an AZAPO project which I started, this community Health Awareness Project. He's the head of that, by dint of his profession.

Saths [Cooper] is in the States; he's with you there. Muntu [Myeza] is involved with the Steve Biko foundation. He's involved in AZAPO; he's the secretary. Nkomo is the one who really went out completely. Nef [Pandelani Nefolovhodwe] is still involved in BC structures. Strini Moodley has got another grouping. It's not purely AZAPO, but it's keeping within — stringing along.

What is that?

Umtapo (?) It's a project in Natal. Okay, they may not all necessarily be all that prominent, but they are quite active in their own limited way. . . .

[Interruption]

. . . sexism in the 1970s.

In the 1970s our approach and attitude was that okay, women's lib really wasn't the thing for us to differentiate within our struggle at the time. We felt oppression is on, it's common. So let's not now begin other struggles within ourselves to fight against sexism per se. Or the perception was then male domination, and we felt that okay, fine, we acknowledge that there is that thing, given the societies that we come from. (Although I doubt those grounds.) But that is not a primary focus of our struggle. It will have to be addressed in the course of struggle. But we don't begin a whole offshoot of a campaign to be for women's liberation. Even then it wasn't feminism as it became more modified, and more rationalized and given better direction. It was like women's lib where you just rebel against society, male-dominated society; but when you say "Do what you want to do," then you didn't have that. Okay, now we are upholding a notion of feminism as opposed to women's libbers. And we do encourage an anti-sexist approach.

But unfortunately you find that by being sort of liberal in approach, you may end up to be even giving acknowledgement to a sexist approach, that look, you want women to be involved as women, whereas what we want to encourage is to let them be involved as persons, without giving consideration that they're involved as women.

There are certain other traits and qualities that they possess, innate qualities that they possess that we don't possess at all times, that we have to give that acknowledgement, to give that encouragement insofar as we want them to have their own initiatives. And that's that.

So it becomes a kind of tokenism?

To some extent. But we do get them involved in structures and so on. We can give you names of women who are presently very active.

Are there any BC women's groups?

You do have groups, but then somehow they fell out (of existence?). You had the Black Women United, but it didn't become the thing we would have aspired to. We've got a very active, vibrant one, Imbeleko Women's Organization. It's national. They've got a socialist outlook toward society, but their problem is the kind of people they're involving. It's youthful women and older women. They are trying to grapple with the problem of making them understand socialist outlook. Maybe you could meet with them. A number of them are Johannesburg based, and there are some in Durban.

[Interruption]

. . . It's the Metal and Electrical Workers' Union of South Africa. It's an amalgamation of four NACTU-affiliated unions: Black Electronics, which is the one I belong to; Electrical Allied, Engineering and Allied, United African Motor and we're expecting another NACTU affiliate, still in engineering, to join us. So I was elected as the assistant general secretary. The general secretary is Tommy Oliphant. He's presently in London studying. I think he should be coming back this month or early next month. I'm in charge while he's away.

Were you elected to that position?

On 28th May this year. In fact, it's an amalgamation of trade unions which was realized after a two year period. We started in 1987 discussing that unions in the metal industries should come together and form one union, so that it makes sense with one union in the industry. Then in two years we finally merged and we formed this new union. (At this stage I'm still moving between the separate offices).

And between 1986 when you talked to Shelagh Gastrow and 1989 when you started doing this, what were you doing?

'86, I was still with AZAPO. I was Projects Coordinator. And at that time I was seconded to assist one union, Black Electronics, which is an AZAPO formation. Up to now I've been in the trade union field basically.

Have you always been an administrator, or were you ever on the shopfloor, so to speak?

Well, as an administrator, and also as an official, but not from the side of being National Projects Coordinator; but it was as an administrator, of course negotiating wages, working conditions, which is what I'm still doing even now. Before we came to you, we were negotiating another case. Tomorrow morning I'll be rushing out to Pretoria to file with the registrar the constitution and the resolutions which now give us this new thing.

What's the acronym.

MEWUSA. Like the USA where you hail from!

Do you have any whites applying to join your unions?

Yes, some of the unions have got whites involved. Well, their role is really minimal. We bring unions from different traditions. TUCSA traditions, they're multiracial; you've got whites. They joined, and they're there, and they don't worry as long as they pay their subs. When TUCSA wound up, they continued to exist, and some of them felt that— . They were supposed to be multiracial, but in practice they were racial. They'd have one for Africans, for coloureds, Indians, and for whites. Other unions had felt that no, we can't continue like that; if anyone wants to join us, let's be one thing. We got an insignificant number of whites, but they are there. In Cape Town; even NACTU itself does say okay, fine, you can come in as whites and work your way up. Some of the affiliates are mixed, like the National Union of Furniture and Allied Workers. They've got whites. All these TUCSA unions. They've got that mix. They come in, affiliate to NACTU, and we just move on.

Are the reasons they affiliate to NACTU rather than COSATU just particular to the industry concerned, or what?

Partly that, and also maybe partly the situation, the fact that traditionally they don't believe in militant trade unionism. Unfortunately some of the background is based on media reporting. Media reporting is so biased; it depends what the journalist believes in. So you end up the day believing that's the only union that exists, that there isn't any other. Partly that, also the question of aggressive recruitment. When TUCSA broke up, NACTU aggressively went out to win the hearts and minds of those unions. And they felt okay, we'll make common cause with you.

The creative driving force of recruiting the TUCSA unions was to concentrate on the black components of its membership. And they would feel comfortable with us because NACTU's composition understands "black" as we also interpret it; that it's all-encompassing, that it's not restricted to just a few, say maybe the Africans, but it's "black" in the—

"Big B"

Exactly.

Non-verbatim (Tape recorder off): Before the emergence of BCM, the exile ANC looked to any internal organizations as ones they could possibly use, including Inkatha (formed 1975) and the Labour Party. People like Buthelezi and Sonny Leon could travel abroad and meet with them. Once BC came up, it muddied things because there had never been such a forthright organized opposition to dummy organizations before. SAG could easily deal with the leaders of these organizations through intimidation. They detained Leon in 1976, and when he came out he was very subdued.