

SOME REFLECTIONS ON IRISH SOLIDARITY WITH THE STRUGGLE AGAINST APARTHEID

by
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South Africa is still one of the youngest democracies in the world. It is sometimes hard to believe that South Africa is a free non-racial democracy where all the people have a say in the government of the country. It is even harder to believe that, given the violent nature of apartheid, the transformation from apartheid where the minority whites ruled the majority black population with the harshest laws imaginable, was relatively peaceful. The legacy of apartheid will however, remain with the people of South Africa for many generations to come.

South Africans of all races struggled to rid their country of apartheid and replace it with a free, non-racial, non-sexist South Africa. This struggle was supported by the international community which put enormous pressure on the apartheid regime through at first, people's boycotts of goods produced in apartheid South Africa and then the removal of any financial support. In Ireland, the struggle for the oppressed majority in South Africa captured the imagination of the people in all parts of the country in a way that few other causes have done. This was to a large extent a result of the dogged work of the Irish Anti-Apartheid Movement (IAAM) which was founded in 1964 with the sole and only purpose of helping to end apartheid. The Movement was launched at a rally to support the international call for the release of Nelson Mandela and his colleagues. This was the beginning of the campaign for breaking links between apartheid South Africa and Ireland.

The success of our campaigns derived from the fact that at every opportunity every effort was made to make the Movement as representative of every aspect of Irish life as possible. Over 30 years of its existence, the IAAM involved the entire spectrum of Irish life - parliamentarians, trade unionists, religious organisations, students and ordinary people - in its objective to isolate the apartheid regime and to provide solidarity to the people of South Africa. Its support base was anchored among Irish trade union movement which was formalised through a unique Liaison Group between the Irish Congress of Trade Unions and the IAAM. Countless people came to demonstrations, wrote letters, travelled round the country speaking at meetings or addressing schools and sacrificed their time to support the struggle for liberation in South Africa and to pressure our Government to impose sanctions. In addition, members of the IAAM became a channel for funds sent by the International Defence and Aid Fund to aid political trials, and finance the families of political prisoners.

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Throughout its existence, the Movement participated in the international action against apartheid through the UN Special Committee against Apartheid, the Liaison Group of national anti-apartheid movements in Europe and the Afro-Asian Peoples' Solidarity Organisation. One of the strengths of the Movement was the very close ties that were maintained with the African National Congress. It was involved in hundreds of campaigns to undermine all links between apartheid South Africa and Ireland but the ones that stand out include the following:

- *in the early days, a playwrights campaign succeeded in persuading 25 Irish playwrights including Samuel Beckett and Sean O'Casey to refuse permission for their plays to be performed before segregated audiences in South Africa and they were joined over the decades by numerous artists and musicians;
- *the campaign against the Springbok tour of Ireland, which still lives on in folk memory of activists in Ireland brought the issue of apartheid firmly on the political map of Ireland and culminated in one of the largest demonstrations in the streets of Dublin. The South African poet, Dennis Brutus who visited Dublin after his release from Robben Island, remarked that the guards at the prison beat all the political prisoners after hearing of the successful Irish demonstration against the Springboks. International solidarity expressed by demonstrations against the Springboks boosted the morale of political prisoners and sustained their spirit against the regime;
- *the first conference on links between the European Union and South Africa was held in Dublin in 1979. Oliver Tambo, the then President of the ANC was the main speaker. The links formed at this conference were later to develop into the Liaison Group of anti-apartheid movements in Europe which played a significant role in putting pressure on the European Community to take a strong stance against apartheid, particularly in June 1990;
- *one of the most memorable events in the annals of the struggle against apartheid in Ireland was the perseverance of the Dunnes Stores' strikers to enforce the boycott of South African goods by a strike against their store from 1984 to 1987. As a result of their determination, the Government banned the import of South African fruit and vegetables in 1987, and
- *the pinnacle of solidarity with the South African struggle against apartheid was portrayed in July 1990, when Nelson Mandela was greeted by thousands of people at the Mansion House where he was to sign the roll of honour as a freeman of Dublin - an honour which was conferred on him in 1988. In his crowded two-day visit he met the Dunnes Stores' strikers, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, the President and the Taoiseach and addressed the Dail, the first non-head of state to do so.

Following the free, non-racial and democratic elections in South Africa in 1994, the work of the IAAM came to an end. The Movement had completed its task. A new organisation, the Ireland South Africa Association was formed to foster bonds of friendship between the people of South Africa and Ireland, and to support the advancement of peace and democracy in South Africa and the Reconstruction and Development of South Africa.

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