



APDUSA VIEWS

SPECIAL ISSUE

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A TRIBUTE TO LEO SIHLALI

Born: 9 September 1915

Died: 20 March 1989



"Where there is no Vision the people Perish"

"Let us live for our children"

INTRODUCTION

On 25 March 1989, the people of Mount Frere, a peaceful town in the Transkei, witnessed an event that will be talked about for a long time. This event was the funeral of **Leo Sihlali**, one of its inhabitants. On that day members of the Unity Movement joined the people of Mount Frere to attend the funeral service and to pay tribute to one of the most outstanding members of their leadership.

The funeral service had to be conducted in the Municipal Hall since no church was available and because the local priests refused to officiate the service on the grounds that Leo Sihlali was not a member of any of their congregations.

Despite the shortness of the funeral service and despite the fact that the funeral service took place over the Easter Weekend, hundreds of people made their way to the hall until all available seats were taken. People still continued to come and were content to stand against the wall or in the foyer. The audience listened attentively for over four hours to the many tributes, choir singing and reading of messages and telegrams of condolences.

Glowing and touching tributes were delivered by representatives of the local community of the teaching profession (Schools and University of the Transkei), of the New Unity Movement, APDUSA and the Cape Action League.

The people of Mount Frere listened in wonder at the startling and inspiring revelations made to them by strangers about *their* Mr Sihlali. This might sound odd since Sihlali was fully integrated in the Mount Frere community. There were those who knew that he was a battle-scarred warrior but many did not know the details. And the man himself was not given to parading his accomplishments.

WHO WAS LEO SIHLALI?

Who was Leo Sihlali? What manner of man was he, who in death could attract people from many hundreds of kilometres to his funeral? Who was the stranger, lovingly adopted by the people of Mount Frere yet hated by the priests?

One speaker described him as a Christian without Christ. Without doubt, that statement was intended as a high compliment. We knew him differently, knew him to be an unrepentant Marxist and an uncompromising revolutionary for over fifty years.

In a tribute of this nature, we can do no more than to record the highlights of his illustrious career which was also full of tribulations. For, to use his own metaphor, Leo Sihlali had more than his share of scorpions.

LATE 1930s

Leo Sihlali was one of the first generation of young radicals who consciously and with understanding embraced the policy of non-Collaboration with the oppressor. He was part of the young generation which fought tooth and nail against the collaborationist section of the leadership of the All African Convention. For over half a century Leo Sihlali and his comrades fought for, upheld and propagated the Policy of Non-Collaboration. They were the Dragons* who sowed the seeds of today's uncompromising militants who will not stop at anything less than the total elimination of oppression and expropriation.

THE EARLY 1940s

He contributed to the regeneration of the All African Convention. In 1945, he was one of those who helped to set the Non-European Unity Movement on a programmatic course of struggle. It was the year when the Ten Point Programme was adopted.

TO LATE 1940s

1. Leo Sihlali and his comrades waged a struggle in the Cape African Teachers' Association (CATA) to get that organisation to integrate its struggle for a democratic system of education with the struggle for a democratic society. They succeeded in affiliating CATA to the All African Convention.
2. A massive campaign was launched against the election of the leader-goat White Native representatives. Leo Sihlali and his comrades worked actively for the boycott of the election of these "White Native Representatives".
3. It was about this period that the Transkei exploded in its rejection of the so-called Rehabilitation Scheme which sought to cull cattle of the African peasantry and to fence off the land. Again in this campaign, Leo Sihlali was in the forefront.

1951

Leo Sihlali was part of the delegation of the All African Convention to the Conference of the Non-European Unity Movement. It was at this historic conference that the oppressed formulated and put forward the concept of one nation in South Africa and the task of the Liberatory Movement to build that nation. Apart from participating in this discussion, Leo Sihlali delivered the paper on "Land Hunger".

There was a joint meeting of the Teachers' League of South Africa and the Cape African Teachers' Association resulting in the formation of the Cape Teachers' Federal Council on 20 December 1951 in Kimberley. Leo Sihlali was elected its first President.

*In Chinese Mythology, dragons are regarded as ancestors of a race of heroes.

He was also elected the President of the Cape African Teachers' Association from 1951 to 1953 and editor of the "Teachers' Vision", (Official Journal of CATA) from 1953 until 1955.

1952

CATA mounted a campaign against the recommendations of the Eiselen Commission in African Education and the All African Convention an offensive against the Bantu Authorities' Act. In the forefront of these campaigns were Leo Sihlali, N. Honono, J. Mkentane, Z.K. Mzimba, R.S. Canca, A.C. Jordan, L. Mqotsi, C.M. Mciteka and many others.

1953

Leo Sihlali attended an important conference of CATA held during December 1953, in Queenstown. CATA publically defied threats made by Eiselen against African teachers who were opposed to Bantu Education. For its time CATA's position was bold and sensational.

1955

On 30 September 1955, the entire CATA Executive members were dismissed from their position as teachers. They were: N. Honono, L.L. Sihlali, Z.K. Mzimba, J.L. Mkentane, D. Nonkonyana, J.B. Shumane, T.T. Maja, S. Mda and B.V. Jordan. These dismissals were the forerunners of a vicious campaign to persecute and victimise members of CATA. To earn a livelihood, Leo Sihlali worked as shop assistant in Queenstown. He continued his work among the peasants by reviving organisations like the Kongo, Transkei Organised Bodies, Glen Grey Stock Rate Association, etc. In this he worked with the legendary peasant fighters — the Joyi Brothers, Ntwana, Tyaliti, Saliwa, Sizani and others.

1956

He was elected General Secretary of the All African Convention.

1957

He had to flee for his life from South Africa. He was threatened by a notorious hireling of the government because of his unrelenting opposition to Bantu Authorities. He fled to Botswana where he taught for a while. He returned to South Africa only to find his family scattered.

1958

He was appointed full time organiser for the All African Convention.

1959

He was appointed President of one section of the Unity Movement.

1960

He was the founder member of APDUSA.

1963

Leo Sihlali was banned and house arrested for 5 years.

1964

There was a wave of arrests of leading Unity Movement members. Leo Sihlali was one of them.

1965

Leo Sihlali and Louis Mtshizana attempted to escape from South Africa. Both were arrested at Koster, about 90 miles from the Botswana border, in a carefully prepared trap. He was sentenced to 3 years imprisonment which he served on Robben Island.

1969

On his return from Robben Island, he went back to teaching. He taught for about a year only when he was arrested and detained. His detention was part of a scoop on over 200 Unity Movement cadres in 1970-1971. His detention for a year was designed to break him, and make him give evidence against fourteen members of APDUSA who were charged under the Terrorism Act. Needless to say, he did not give evidence.

1972

On his release from detention, Leo Sihlali was shunted from place to place. He taught at Mount Hargreaves, Osborne, Nyanga, Ntlaza, Huka and finally he returned to Mount Frere with its beautiful setting, its peaceful atmosphere and its friendly people. Here, at last, this noble bedouin rested, performed his function as an educationist, grew roots and settled among its people. It was also here that he died.

1983

He, together with people like Justice Poswa, Don Kali and others initiated the revival of the Unity Movement. He set in motion the process of revival and returned to his other love, the education of children. For the remaining years of his life, Leo Sihlali took a keen interest in the progress and development of the New Unity Movement.

Though he was in his seventies, he remained an active community member. He was the doyen of the teachers and the intellectuals and was elected the President of the Transkei Teachers' Association. He represented this association in the Council of the University of the Transkei.

The children of Mount Frere must have dearly loved the man. The Youth Choir sang songs at his funeral — songs especially composed for him — an eulogy of a brave warrior who was also capable of tremendous care and tenderness for children.

The above then, is no more than an incomplete and a bare outline of his life. It does not claim to do justice to the man's life and contribution. For that to be done, we require a properly researched biography.

THOUGHTS OF LEO SIHLALI

Leo Sihlali was a deep thinker and wrote with passion. His style is a captivating one. It is a pity that most of his writings are lost. Very little remains. From these, we will quote excerpts to give the reader a sample of the man's thinking and style:—

ON WHY WHEELS OF HISTORY CANNOT BE TURNED BACK . . .

“The **TRUTH** is that just as tribalism was broken down in Europe by the socio-economic forces that introduced higher forms of civilization, so was tribalism broken down by the same socio-economic forces in South Africa. Tribalism, once broken down, can never be restored because the socio-economic forces that destroy it cannot be withdrawn, once they have come. You cannot rebuild the black tribes and Trek Boer “republics” that existed in South Africa in the middle of the last century any more than you can rebuild the twelve tribes of Israel, any more than you can rebuild the numerous tribes that occupied the Italia, Gallia, Germania and Britannia of Caesar's **Gallic War**. Tribal systems of education disappear with the tribes, and as a higher form of human society springs up from the ruins of tribalism, a higher form of culture arises, including a higher form of education as part and parcel of the new social system. Any one who suggested to the modern British and French that they should revert to the educational system of the Druids would be laughed out of court. If you suggested to the present-day descendants of the Trek Boers that they should give up all these modern things and confine their education to Trek Boer “culture” as described by Lindley in 1839, you would probably be tarred and feathered — and quite justifiably too, because once a social system has been superseded, you cannot base any educational system on it. In South Africa, black tribalism and Boer feudalism were both superseded by modern civilization, and no system of education can be based on either. To base African education on a non-existent or artificially created tribal system is to destroy the African because the aim of a tribal system of education is to preserve tribal traditions and tribal unity which has no future in the development of the African. Those who are trying to force “Bantu Education” on the Africans know these things. The reason why they are attempting this is that they do not want to admit the African into the new society that has arisen on the ruins of tribalism and feudalism. They are not interested in human development but in white supremacy, as Verwoerd has openly declared, and this can only be achieved by denying the African his legitimate right to modern knowledge.”

ON ALLIANCES WITH LIBERALS . . .

“It has already been stated that what has given rise to the struggle between us and the ruling class is a clash of interests. Now it goes without saying that even the humblest of us does, by his actions, advance the interests of the one or other of the opposing groups. It is also a fact that in any society there can be only two fundamentally and irreconcilably opposed groups. In the present historical

setting in South Africa there cannot be even a temporary alliance between us and any of the sections of the ruling class. Whoever then concludes any pacts with any of these sections is not our friend. Be it clearly understood that any such, irrespective of the colour of his skin, is a carrier of the disease-germs of the prejudices and outlook of the group-enemy. Our future to isolate such will result in disunity in our ranks. I shall emphasize that none of the different sections of the ruling class is placed in as good a strategic position as the liberals to play effectively and efficiently the old game of divide and rule. (If we are sufficiently vigilant, I can foresee a recrudescence of liberal influence in our affairs, with all the dire fruits which our forbears reaped as a result of their fraternisation with these gentry.”)

ON RECOGNITION OF OUR MISSION . . .

“With our feet firmly planted on the solid rock of principle, and our eyes fixed on the goal for which we are striving, we cannot be shaken or diverted from our course. If we are convinced of the righteousness of our cause, if we firmly believe that the highest duty of every man and woman to assist in the creation of a new and higher society, we shall keep our vision clear so that we do not mistake dross for the gem. We shall recognise ourselves as nothing more or less than men and women for whom nothing but the best, the very best, is good enough. If this recognition of our true worth as human beings and the rejection of the false and base standards set by the rulers that will give us staying power to resist the pressure of the ideas of the group-enemy. In other words we shall be capable of a sustained effort or struggle only if we recognise our mission. For let it be remembered that we are not merely committed to resist any further encroachments on the rights which some thought had been brought down to the irreducible minimum, but, above all, we are committed to struggle for the attainment of higher ends, for a higher society. These are the things for which we stand and for which shall struggle.”

ON WHAT IF THE ODDS ARE GREAT . . . ?

What if the odds are great? What if the wrath of the fascist beast is roused against us? What if we feel his hot breath about our faces, and the foul stench of it assails our nostrils, shall we faint? What if we hear the yelping of the curs at his heels, shall we abandon the cause, shall we give up the struggle? No!”

ON WHO ARE WE . . . ?

“Who are we and whence are we? We have already shown what a caricature of men and women we have been made to be. So now we shall ask: Who are we, and whither are we bound? We are of Africa, Africans, and of the world, part of humanity. In our own country we lay full claim to unqualified citizenship and democracy in education. We demand for ourselves to have a say in the shaping of educational policy; we demand an educational system in conformity with accepted standards; the right to be consulted in the making of our conditions of service. For our children we demand the opportunity to develop their minds

and personalities to the highest level to which their inborn qualities will allow them. We demand for them the right to schools worthy of the name; access to the best books and libraries, the right for them and ourselves”

*“To follow knowledge, like a sinking star,
Beyond the utmost bounds of human thought.”*

For whither we are bound? For we are bound for a Society in which neither the accidents of Birth nor Colour, Creed nor Sex shall be permitted to stand in the way of the enjoyment of those fruits either material or spiritual, physical or intellectual, which the ingenuity of the human mind or the skill of man’s hand has made possible. And that in this same Sunny South Africa.

ON THE DANGER OF LIBERALISM . . .

“We must not underrate the power of this group to split up the Liberation Movement. Of necessity the liberatory struggle has been led by the middle class and the approach of the Progressive Party is not without attraction to them. In fact a study of the different political stunts in the past will reveal that the middle class leadership has in all its fights against Nationalists enjoyed the plaudits of the industrial class and in some known cases their covert support. It is not at all surprising that they have called for anti-Nationalist fronts. The choice of their prospective allies in these would-be fronts are revealing. That their stunts in more recent years have been made to synchronise with the so-called general elections is not without significance. Making these strictures is a painful necessity.

There is no doubt but that the industrialists will ultimately break the back of the Broederbond, and that of the United Party too, if it persists in its contemptuous attitude towards the Non-European middle class leadership for, as they see it, this will leave these gentlemen with no alternative but to use the masses who in the process will gain political experience and become conscious of their power. We must be on our guard to repel the advances of the industrial class for when they have broken the backs of these two herrenvolk groups then will begin the full-scale attack on the integrity of the Non-European middle class leadership. The weapon of the industrial class is liberalism and the greatest danger to the Liberation Movement will come from that quarter.”

ON THE QUESTION OF LEADERSHIP . . .

“The N.E.U.M. approach to the matter of leadership is much more serious than that of any other organisation that we know of. In the first place principles and policies come before persons. Loyalty and allegiance is not to persons but to the organisation. There can thus be no question of following leaders but recognition of adherence to policy. This immediately rules out Messiahs. Yet another thing. It is accepted in our organisation that he whose actions are beneficial to the enemy cannot be acting in the best interests of the people, that

in fact he does harm to the struggles of the people. A person's claim for inclusion in the leadership, therefore, is judged by the simple criterion, among others, of whether he is able to make a sharp distinction between herrenvolk ideas and ours, between their politics and ours. These are not mere platitudes. If that were so we would not have witnessed the sorry sight of people's organisations being repeatedly embroiled in the internal struggles of the herrenvolk, to the extent of their appearing to be used, we would have been saved the unwholesome spectacle of leaders of people's organisations publicly declaring their support for the Liberal or the Progressive Party. We make no distinction between these and any other party. We reject them not because they are white parties but because they are *herrenvolk* parties. To us whoever denies anybody else the right to participate fully and immediately in the running of the country on grounds of colour or race is imbued with a master-race mentality no matter with what sophistries he may attempt to conceal this ugly fact."

ON COURAGE FROM IDEAS . . .

"You have been warned of the infiltration of the ideas of the herrenvolk into the politics of the oppressed. We have in our own literature a by no means poor arsenal of the right kind of ideas. Let us draw liberally from this. It is these ideas that will give us courage to bear the bannings and banishment, the imprisonment and privations that a desperate and maddened herrenvolk, conscious of its impending doom will inflict on us. I would ask you not to regard yourselves as pioneers but as heirs of a long tradition of all that is best. We walk in the footsteps of those who regarded freedom as dearer than life itself. If our lives have to be lost in the struggle to liberate the millions of Non-Europeans throughout Southern Africa from the scourge of want and degradation, from ignorance and superstition, from humiliation and political oppression, then let us gladly die in the knowledge that our blood shall not have been spilled in vain but shall enrich the soil from which will spring the tree of freedom.

*For how can man die better
Than facing fearful odds,
For the ashes of his fathers
And the temples of his gods."*

The above are snatches of his thoughts. They were at once an expression of Unity Movement ideas and his own enrichment of such ideas. In other words, he was not simply a loyal purveyor of Unity Movement ideas; he contributed to the Unity Movement ideas. The Unity Movement itself was and is proud to have had so able and eloquent a representative. His style of presentation of those ideas were strictly and inimitably his own.

IMPACT OF NEW IDEAS

To recapture what took place in the rural areas of the Cape of the 1940s when the radical ideas of the Unity Movement battled against a wall of prejudice and ignorance would require the skill of a talented writer. We cannot even begin to imagine how potent new ideas can be and their shattering impact on an existing society. Prior to the entry of these ideas, the missionaries and their proteges dominated the scene. Political leaders were renowned for their ignorance of laws governing society and the nature of the various forces operating — tribalism, feudalism, imperialism, capitalism, etc.

They did not even understand the ruling class whose actions were invariably attributed to caprice and whims. The leaders were totally dependent on the liberals for the role they had to play and the direction they had to take. They never realised that the liberals were the agents of imperialism. For that matter, neither do some of our “leaders” even today. How else can we explain the presence of Azar Cachalia and Paul David representing the UDF and the Natal Indian Congress respectively at a unity conference of these liberals when the Democratic Party was launched?

The introduction of new ideas had the effect of a head-on collision with the old outdated ideas. The people and the intellectuals used the new ideas as a gigantic broom and swept away the ideas of yesteryear. The Transkei and the Ciskei had become radicalised. These regions have never been the same again. Credit for the intellectual transformation must be given to Leo Sihlali and his band of courageous comrades.

THE MAN HIMSELF

Leo Sihlali lived the simple life of a great man. The struggle for liberation took up most of his life. Although he suffered a great deal, he did not deviate a hair's breath from the principles and world outlook which sustained him throughout his life.

After 1976, there ran amok in the Transkei an army of thieves, rogues, plunders, looters and despoilers. It was a time when even the honest were tempted. In the midst of all this, Leo Sihlali's life was a shining example of honesty and integrity.

*“What though on hamely fare we dine,
Wear hodden grey an' a' that;
Gie fools their silks, and knaves their wine,
A Man's a Man for a' that:
For a' that and a' that
Their tinsel show, an' a' that;
The honest man, tho' e'er sae poor
Is king o' men for a' that.*

(Robert Burns)

HIS FAMILY

Leo Sihlali leaves his wife and comrade of many decades, Eunice Nomkini. He has three daughters — Mvulazana, Pumla and Yolisa. They have been a closely-knit family, each caring and loving the other. They will miss him most.

When we count the deeds of a freedom fighter, his commitment to the struggle, his immense courage which made it possible for him to endure the harsh retribution, we tend to leave out a vital component, namely, the support he has received from members of his family. His sufferings become theirs and their sufferings become his. We know of many cases of how once committed freedom fighters desert the battlefield because members of his family will not stand by him. Such pressures devastate the freedom fighter. Such pressures can sap his courage and morale like no prison can.

So, in the final result, a substantial portion of Leo Sihlali's contribution to the struggle can be attributed to Comrade Nomkini. His glory is therefore also hers. And this we want her to know. We also want her to know that her late husband has won himself a place of honour in the leadership of the Unity Movement. His name lies besides the names of the political giants of the Liberatory Movement. His name will be mentioned in the same breath when names like I.B. Tabata, Dr Gool, B.M. Kies, Ally Fataar, Saul Jayiya, Jane Gool, N. Honono, R.O. Dudley and other members of the star-studded leadership of the Unity Movement are mentioned.

CONCLUSION

The death of Leo Sihlali has left a void that will remain a void. There will not be another Leo Sihlali. He has been like a mighty oak tree which was so long in our midst that we assumed that it would live forever. And we took it for granted. We only realise its greatness now that it has fallen. The loss seems inconsolable. Although the long term objectives he worked for all his life have not been achieved, there was no despondency in him. He witnessed the marvellous transformation the oppressed underwent.

As a young adult, he saw how the leadership of the Liberatory Movement was stricken with the slave mentality and he also saw how people who called themselves leaders degraded themselves by hopping to the tune played by their liberal mentors.

In the late winter of his life, he would have enjoyed the spectacle of revolutionary change in the young intellectualls, the youth, the workers and peasants. He would have observed these changes over the decades. He would have noticed with quiet pleasure how the ideas of the Unity Movement had become national currency. He would have relished the scene of different sections of the ruling class falling over each other in a scramble to seduce the oppressed. All these would have given him much cause for optimism and satisfaction that his sacrifices were not in vain.

We consider it appropriate to conclude this tribute with a quotation from Olive Schreiner, that great and noble South African who was also a champion of the oppressed and exploited. The theme of the quotation is the life-long search for truth and knowledge.

"I have sought; for long years have I laboured, but I have not found her. I have not rested, I have not repined, and I have not seen her; now my strength is gone. Where I lie worn out, other men will stand, young and fresh. By the steps I cut they will climb; by the stairs I have built they will mount. At the clumsy work they will laugh; when the stones roll they will curse me. But they will mount, and on my work; they will climb, and by my stair! They will find her, and through me. And no man liveth to himself and no man dieth to himself."

(The Story of an African Farm)

CORRECTIONS				
Page	Paragraph	Line	Delete	Replace with
2	3	1	service	series
3	1	8	expropriation	exploitation
4	—	but	the	a
5	7	1	remained	remained