

Johnny Gomas as I knew him

Johnny Gomas was a trade unionist and central figure in the Communist Party of SA. Ray Alexander, veteran trade unionist and communist, argues that the book *Johnny Gomas: voice of the working class. A political biography* by Doreen Musson* misrepresents the memory of a comrade she knew well.

I appreciate Doreen Musson's research on Johnny Gomas's ancestry, his development in Kimberley, his relationship with his mother and his appreciation of her and his antipathy to his father. From the day he introduced his mother to me, I noted their love for one another. On occasions when he insisted that no drunks should be allowed to our meetings, he said: "I have had enough of drunks - my father was one."

My recollection of Johnny is somewhat different from Musson's. I met him four days after my arrival in Cape Town. It was he who introduced me to comrades James Shuba, James La Guma, Cissie Gool and Clements Kadalie.

We organised and conducted study classes at 22 Hanover Street. Comrade Johnny brought to these classes scholars from Trafalgar College like Benny Kies, workers from Salt River Works

like John Mtini, and Van Der Schyff, an Afrikaner ticket examiner who he politicised during his train trips from Maitland to Cape Town. He brought factory workers and coloured and white intellectuals. He taught us all to sing 'Nkosi Sikeleli Afrika'. In all of us he imbued a humane friendship and a strong desire to bring revolutionary change to South Africa.

We worked together from that time. Together we cleaned our party office, walked on Table Mountain, and pick-nicked at the sea-side. In District Six and Woodstock we sold the party paper, and discussed the Black Republic slogan and how to politicise the workers.

Reading Musson's book I came to the conclusion that she lacked a real appreciation of Cde Johnny, because of her antipathy to the Communist Party, of which Johnny was a builder, an old and

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loyal member. Ironically, Musson strongly supports Trotskyism, which Gomas despised.

Organising in the countryside...

On page 30 she writes:

"Gomas had a disregard for the Agrarian revolution, like his party", yet she admits that he went to the countryside and recruited hundreds of farm labourers for the ICU.

On page 31 she writes: "...like a classical Marxist he concentrated his energies on the main industrial centres and even revealed a degree of condescension towards the countryside". What makes her say this? Of course we all concentrated on industrial areas, but at no time did Johnny ignore the countryside. He organised protest meetings in Paarl in December 1927 against the shooting of two Africans. He, Silvana and Ndobe were sentenced to three months hard labour in June 1928 (p 37). They went to Worcester and other rural areas to organise the people against race discrimination - all of them members of the Communist Party.

... and the unions

The work carried out by Cde Johnny and other party members is a reflection of the Communist Party's commitment to organise the workers on industrial lines, with a militant democratic and accountable leadership. Kadalie forced through the expulsion of party members



Detail from the cover of the book

from the ICU, but our Party doubled its efforts to organise African, coloured and Indian workers. No organisation has done the work of the organisation in which comrade Johnny was an organiser and leader - the Communist Party of SA.

On page 64 Musson writes, "the times called for

sound leadership, solidarity and mass action. But these qualities were sorely lacking in all the major organisations of the oppressed."

The trade unions of black workers were poorly organised everywhere. We did systematic work to organise the unorganised, and to introduce democracy in the

existing unions. That is how the character of the unions affiliated to the Cape Federation of Labour, with Robert Stuart as the General Secretary, was changed. We organised strikes against wage cuts in the African clothing factories, and organised Tram and Omnibus workers. We organised demonstrations for unemployment insurance, for jobs and against the pass laws. In December 1932 our comrades faced banning orders and imprisonment.

Our party members Gomas, James LaGuma, Moses Kotane, J B Marks, Josie Palmer, Edwin Mofutsenyana, Cissie Gool, H A Naidoo and George Poonen built the National Liberation League, the African National Congress and the Indian National Congress and the None-European United Front. They organised demonstrations against all oppressive laws. Therefore her statement, on page 89, that the ANC/CPSA fraction was careful to make sure that any changes in the system of oppression would not be too traumatic for whites is simply untrue and malicious. She does not supply any evidence in support of this slander. She does not understand the role Johnny played in the party and gives the impression that he was a kind of 'camp follower' who carried out instructions. This is wrong - he took a leading part in all the party's political and trade union decisions.

On pages 102-6 she attacks the party for supporting the Second World War. The only organisation that denounced the war was our Party. It changed its stand only when Nazi Germany attacked the Soviet Union. She omits the fact that in July 1940, at a special joint meeting in Bloemfontein, the All Africa Convention - an organisation nurtured by the Trotskyites - together with the ANC, passed a resolution giving support to the war effort. In the same week Cde Moses Kotane sent a telegram to General Smuts protesting against the Draft Segregation Ordinance which the Cape Provincial Council discussed.

In June 1940 Cde Johnny, in his article in *Freedom, the Party Organ* wrote: "How can we be interested in fighting Nazism thousands of miles away, while in reality we have a similar master denouncing us here?" The Communist Party alone issued leaflets attacking the war, and at factories in town and country we campaigned against the war.

On page 54 she alleges "that many, many members who were expelled from the Party joined the Lenin Club". Only one member, Auerbuch, who was expelled from the party because of his racist attitude, became a member of the Lenin Club.

She makes a sweeping statement about the poor qualities of leaders in all mass organisations. Does she include Cde Johnny and his

party colleagues? In my opinion he showed courage and independent thinking which he injected in our party, and a commitment to the mobilisation of the oppressed.

To his and our regret he never went to the Soviet Union. He was elected to go to the Soviet Union in 1931. His excitement and enthusiasm at this decision was so great that the next morning he applied for a passport. When he reported it to the District Party Committee all of us, including him, felt that if he did not get a passport, he should not go with a false passport, the way other comrades went, as the police would be on the look-out for him. Comrade Johnny was not given a passport and never went to the Soviet Union.

Gomas and Trotskyism

On page 91 she records that Johnny joined the Anti-CAD (Coloured Affairs Department) Committee. After lengthy discussion in the party, he went there to represent the party. He also went to the New Era Fellowship debates. He despised the Trotskyites and went to save the young intellectuals from their ideology. He took the same position toward the Non-European Unity Movement.

On page 105 she writes: "The tension between him and his party never led to the logical conclusion, his resignation or expulsion. He remained a party member until the CPSA dissolved in

1950, even though his role in the 1940's was limited to that of supporting one or other party candidate for an election." In fact he stood in the 1943 municipal election on a party ticket.

She is upset that he was never expelled, nor did he resign. After the party's dissolution in 1950, we worked together, and had meetings to give political and practical guidance to comrades working in the trade unions. When we were banned, and prohibited from meeting one another as 'banned persons', we nevertheless met and exchanged views. Two nights before my departure from South Africa we met and were like old party members. He cried and I assured him that we shall be back to help liberate our country from race oppression and class exploitation. Over the years we spasmodically corresponded under cover. My great regret is that he died without seeing liberation.

Putting the record straight

On page 104 Musson writes: "By the end of 1940 Gomas was out of the party hierarchy, apparently having incurred the wrath of the majority of the leadership because of his obsession with Black leadership instead of class leadership". This is wrong. The facts are as follows:

In January 1940 the District Party Committee decided that I should not be the Secretary of the DPC, to enable me to give all my attention to trade union work. Comrade Johnny, supported by Bill Andrews, was the prime mover behind this decision. During the year we organised more unions. At the end of 1940, after many discussions, it was agreed that Cde Johnny should resign his post as party organiser and chairman of the DPC, and assist in trade union work. I recommended him to the Chemical Workers Industrial Union, established in 1936, and to the SA Tin Workers Union, which was established in January 1940, as secretary of these two unions. In line with our party policy we helped unions to elect secretaries from the workers' ranks.

For example, Ishmail Baboo became secretary of the Sweet Workers Union, replacing myself. Philip Benjamin became secretary of the Wine Brandy Workers Union. Cassim Benjamin led the Cape Town Stevedoring Workers Union (after the death of Henry October). Lucas Phillips was elected to take on the Cape Quarry Workers Union. Benny January replaced me as the secretary of the Laundry Workers Union. There were also others. We educated and trained these comrades - Cde Johnny, myself and all these

comrades worked in a collective, shared duties and experiences. I took on the job of organising the Food and Canning Workers Union which was launched on the 6th February 1941.

There are several other errors in Musson's book. Cde Johnny Gomas did not recruit Moses Kotane to the party. Moses was introduced to the party by Cde Albert Nzula and Charles Baker. Moses became General Secretary of the party in January 1939.*

Umkhonto We Sizwe was formed on 16 December 1961, not in September 1962. She spells Solly Sachs' name incorrectly. Cornelia Gomas was a member of the Chemical Workers Industrial Union, not the SA Tin Workers Union. The photo of the 5th annual conference of the National Liberation League shows Doctor Worodiah Abdurahman and not Mrs Abdurahman.

Gomas - contribution to Marxism, Leninism and the party

But the most important error in Musson's book is the incorrect appreciation of Johnny Gomas's contribution to introducing Marxism and Lenin's ideologies to young and old, and to building the Communist Party, the National Liberation League and the trade unions, for a free, united and democratic South Africa. ☆

* See Moses Kotane - South African Revolutionary - a political biography by Brian Bunting - Inkululeko Publications. London p.46