

A taste of their own medicine

When we arrived on death row we were made to share the same section and cells with common law prisoners.

We approached the prison authorities to transfer us to another section because we feared that being in that section would undermine our position as political prisoners.

"Nee, daar is geen politieke gevangenes hier nie. Julle het mense dood gemaak," they replied. (No, there are no political prisoners here. You have murdered people.)

After countless efforts we gave that battle up. We then settled, organised study groups and, political discussions. We involved all common law prisoners and in the process struck close friendships with them.

Prison conditions, like in all prisons, were always a burning issue. After repeated refusals by the authorities to improve the conditions, we embarked on a hunger strike.

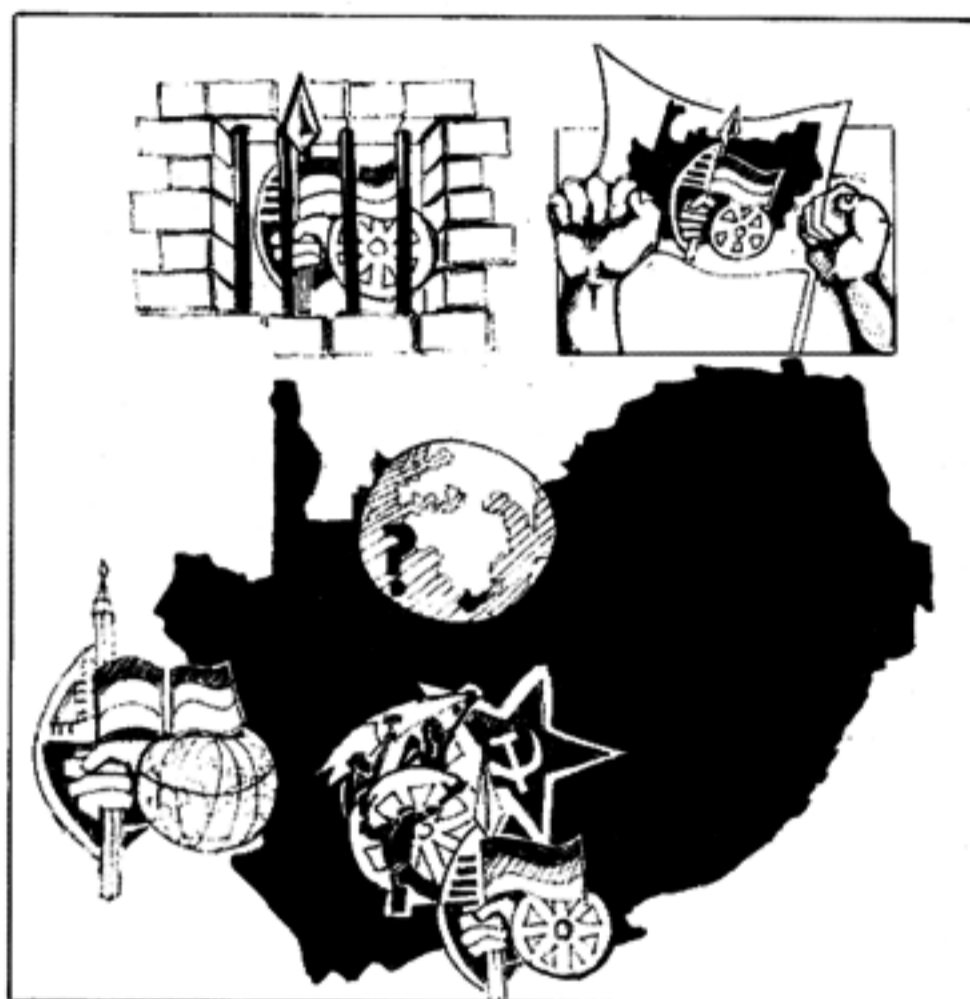
The majority of common law prisoners joined. That was a big shock to the prison authorities. Numerous attempts were made to break the hunger strike but to no avail.

Finally the authorities came and told us that they were transferring us to a new section for political prisoners on death row, and we answered: "Nee, daar is geen politieke gevangenes hier nie. Ons het mense dood gemaak."

Stretching precautions to bankruptcy

Living under the repressive conditions in South Africa taught even the parents of activists how to operate clandestinely. Whenever my father had a suspicion that the Security

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Branch would be raiding my home he would take all the leaflets and posters from my room and hide them in the basement of our block of flats.

When I went to exile he continued using secret methods. I managed to get him an address to which he could send me letters. As usual he took immense precautions.

He put down a false name and address for the sender. Not satisfied with that, he even posted it to a false address, with a false name.

I am still waiting for that letter. Unfortunately, it had some money in it, enough for one visit to the duty-free shop in Lusaka for one bottle of a decent drink.

My tent, my cell, my bedroom

A close friend who works at the ANC Headquarters tells me that

he overheard one ANC leader who spent many years on Robben Island telling a journalist over the phone that he would not be able to honour an appointment as he was going to have an interview on Robben Island. He meant to say at his place. I could not laugh because I have the same problem.

In Vienna, one of our transit camps in Angola, we stayed in tents. On arrival in prison I had a problem of referring to my cell as my tent.

It took me considerable time to learn that a cell was a cell and not a tent, and was stunned by the joy of correctly identifying my cell as one.

I spent five years in prison and was released this July. Four months on I still have a problem of referring to my bedroom as my cell and my family members always laugh their lungs out. Come the day when I will call my bedroom my bedroom. ♦