

## LIES IN THE LIFE OF 'COMRADE BILL'<sup>1</sup>

Baruch Hirson

Frank Glass and W H (Bill) Andrews were close friends, both socially and politically. It is not certain when they first became intimate, but they certainly met at the founding conference of the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) in 1921, where Glass was the youngest delegate. They occupied leading positions in the party and were in constant contact with one another. In 1923/4 Andrews was party secretary, Glass the treasurer and full-time organizer. Both worked in the white trade unions and were the protagonists inside the CPSA for affiliation to the South African Labour Party (SALP). In 1923 the CPSA, reduced in size after the suppression of the general strike of 1922, decided at its annual conference to apply for affiliation to the SALP, only to have its overture rejected.

The isolation of the CPSA worsened and, seeking a new initiative, members of the party's Youth League favoured a radical change in policy. Grouped around Eddie Roux and Willie Kalk, they urged party members to seek recruits among black youth and black workers. Some members opposed this policy, others accepted it enthusiastically.

In mid-1924 conditions changed in South Africa. General Smuts was defeated in a general election by an alliance of the National and the Labour Parties. This had CPSA support, but the party condemned the entry of Labour into the government.

Nonetheless, Glass and Andrews moved that the party apply for affiliation to the SALP, for the second time. Their approach arose, at least partly, from a letter written from a sanatorium in Yalta by David Ivon Jones, in mid-1924. Jones was one of the acknowledged founders of the CPSA, and this was the last letter he sent before his untimely death. The letter was sent to Andrews but was obviously meant for the leading members of the CPSA. Glass had a clear memory in 1986 of Andrews having read the letter to him soon after it was received.<sup>1</sup>

Jones had said that the CPSA had been reduced to a sect and should be dissolved temporarily. Communists should regain their position among workers through the trade unions and their one hope organizationally was to seek affiliation with the SALP. Yet, despite the segregatory policy of the SALP, it would be wrong to read into this a racist approach on the part of Jones. Jones had worked through the problems of ethnicity and class and, like many others, had made mistakes in his evaluation of the white workers as a revolutionary force. However, when he was tried for publishing and distributing a leaflet entitled 'The Bolsheviks are Coming' in Pietrmaritzburg in 1919, he had maintained in court that the future Lenin of South Africa would be an African. Later, in 1921, when he spoke at the congress of the

Communist International (or Comintern), he had been the first to call for the convening of a Congress of Negro Toilers. Furthermore, in the above mentioned letter in which he urged the CPSA to seek affiliation with the SALP, he already perceived in Roux the kind of young party member who could best represent the interests of communism in South Africa.

Andrews did not intervene actively in the debate at the party conference in 1924 and it was left to Glass to lead the debate. He spoke about winning white workers but noted that the party had to find its way to the black and the white masses. He said that through the SALP there would be access to Coloured and African voters (in the Cape) — and there is no indication that he cast any aspersions at the black worker as stated subsequently by communist historians. In fact, an unknown informer at the conference, who reported to the Department of Justice, ascribed remarks with a possible racist slant to W H Andrews!<sup>2</sup>

This time the resolution on affiliation was opposed by S P Bunting, Roux and Kalk, and was narrowly defeated. Andrews and Glass resigned from the executive committee of the party and withdrew from the Central Executive in February 1925. However, according to Roux, Glass left the party immediately after the conference, and then made a statement during an interview to the *Star* that Africans could not appreciate the noble ideas of communism. I searched through the files of the *Star* but could find no such interview. However, there was a letter signed by Roux, as General Secretary of the CPSA, on 4 March 1925, written in response to press reports. He said that neither Andrews nor Glass had left the party, but Glass had resigned as treasurer because of pressure of trade union work.

In fact, after the December conference many members of the CPSA drifted away and were not heard of again. On 9 May Frank Glass wrote to the secretary of the CPSA. He claimed that membership of the party had dwindled and that 'the antagonism of the white worker has increased'. He continued:

Today the Communist Party in South Africa is a sect — nothing more, and is regarded by the average European worker as an anti-white party with some justification. For the tactics (or antics) of the more prominent Party members display a distinct bias against the whites in favour of the blacks, and all the propaganda of the Party appears to be directed towards 'getting the backs up' of the former.

This, he said, was harmful to the general progress of the Labour Movement in South Africa'. He resigned from the CPSA and joined the SALP.

Nonetheless, it was a mistake to have adopted a policy of entryism in the SALP in South Africa. Jones, Bunting, Andrews and others in the CPSA had been members of the executive of the SALP before the First World War but resigned in 1915 because they opposed the party's pro-war stance. They were fully aware of the vigorous segregation policy of the SALP and had been among the first to reject colour or ethnicity as a criterion for member-

ship of any movement. Now that the SALP was part of government, there could be no place for communists in its ranks.

Andrews stayed in the CPSA after the 1924 conference but, despite having been a member of the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI) in 1923, editor of the party paper, the *International*, and a leading party figure in the strike of 1922,<sup>3</sup> played no further active role in the CPSA until the late 1930s.

Glass was secretary of the Witwatersrand Tailors' Association and together with Andrews was prominent in the founding conference of the South African Association of Employees' Organizations (SAAEO), the newly launched trade union federation. Andrews was elected secretary and Glass treasurer, amidst claims by the press that the communists had captured control of the trade union movement. Present at the founding conference of the in 1925 was Fanny Klenerman, organizer with the assistance of Eva Green, of the women sweet workers and waitresses. Fanny was militant and, if she had not met Glass before, would have been noticed by him now. Green was a teacher and under the terms of her employment could not work openly in a political party, or in a trade union.

Glass and Klenerman, together with Andrews and Green, were socially inseparable. In this they crossed party affiliation lines, and the CPSA took no action against Andrews. The narrow sectarianism of the Comintern, which helped to ruin so many promising political cadres in Europe, had not yet crippled the South African CP. Andrews and Glass were brought even closer by their work in the trade unions. It was probably in this capacity that they both attended meetings of the black general workers union, the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union of Africa (ICU), and spoke from its platform in 1925 and 1927. They did this as trade unionists, and yet their appearance at ICU meetings after 1926 flew in the face of ICU stated policy.

#### *Addressing the ICU*

The ICU, which seemed to be growing into a mighty movement by 1925 was actually in poor shape. After its initial involvement in a dock strike in 1919 the movement was not very successful as a trade union. Its main branches were in small towns where there was little manufacture and its leaders stayed away from industrial action. Many of its officers were corrupt and the money collected from workers went into private pockets. Alcoholism was rife, and at least one top official became a police informer.<sup>4</sup>

Although the ICU claimed to be a general worker's union, it was a community organization. Men were organized in the townships and the 'union' could do little more than represent its members legally when they encountered problems. This was a useful but costly service that could not be sustained. The decline of the ICU was probably inevitable but was speeded up in 1926 when members of the ICU, who were also members of the Com-

munist Party of South Africa (CPSA), were confronted by an ultimatum to resign from the CPSA or leave the ICU.

It seems that the ultimatum was precipitated by the report prepared in 1925 by the assistant general-secretary of the ICU and member of the CPSA, James La Guma. In this he accused the top leadership of corruption. The response from that leadership was ill-considered but inevitable. All communists had to go.

It therefore came as a surprise when Andrews and Glass spoke from ICU platforms. Andrews was still in the party and Glass's views were even more radical than that of his friend. Glass was first asked by Clemens Kadalie, the ICU leader, to be the movement's book-keeper and produce accounts in accordance with new government regulations. Kadalie also stated that he wanted Glass to be appointed treasurer of the ICU but this was blocked by the ICU council.

Both Glass and Andrews addressed ICU meetings including one in 1925 on the subject of the British seamen's strike,<sup>5</sup> and one on 28 March 1927 in Johannesburg, when a meeting was called to protest against the passing of the first reading of the Native Administration Bill. This legislation was designed to move control of African affairs to the Native Affairs Department, and contained measures that could cripple all black organization at the behest of the Minister of Native Affairs.

About 2,000 Africans and a small group of whites, Indians, and Chinese attended. Both Andrews and Glass spoke and both speeches were reported in the morning and evening press. It was the address given by Glass that received the main headlines and the main strictures, although both speakers were condemned in the press and in Parliament.

Andrews spoke in his personal capacity, and his words were those of a radical trade unionist. He advised African workers to organize, taking no account of colour, religion or the politics of members. He continued:

I say to you, and all the workers of South Africa, whether European, Native or any other nationality, that they have got to organize along the lines of industry, irrespective of creed, colour or politics, and if you do that and the European workers as well — you will not only be able to stop this bill, but you will be able to raise yourselves indefinitely higher than you have ever been before. Build up your organisation, irrespective of prejudices, so as to take possession of this country — I am now speaking to all workers, white, black and coloured — as the Russians have of their country and as the Chinese are endeavouring to do — and for the first time in history you will be able to enjoy the fruits of your labour.

Andrews' talk drew applause, but it was Glass who got the audience to their feet with his call for revolutionary action.

If you will do what the Russian workers have done and what the Chinese workers are doing now you — all the workers of this country,

black and white — will be able to secure freedom. We don't know at the moment how far the Government is going in its attempt to restrict the freedom of the Native workers; but this we do know, that all capitalist governments in their dealings with the workers act precisely alike. Therefore we have got to be prepared, not merely with demonstrations, but also — if it proves to be necessary — with far more drastic action.<sup>6</sup>

Glass was stopped at this point by the police who took his name and claimed that his address was potentially illegal. There was a stormy response when the matter was raised the next day in the South African parliament with demands that Glass be prosecuted and that his activities be curtailed. The matter was not acted upon and there was no prosecution. Andrews was coupled with Glass and also condemned by General Hertzog, the Prime Minister. The speech was a turning point for Glass, but there was one more incident before he quitted the white trade union movement and the South African Labour Party.<sup>7</sup>

In 1926 Glass acted with Andrews when he sued Matthews of the Amalgamated Engineers Union for defamation after it had been asserted that he had manipulated the balance sheet of the SAAEO to ensure the payment of Andrew's salary. The court found for Glass, and Matthews issuing a retraction, paid half Glass's costs. It was a minor event but must have taxed Frank's slender resources. In 1927 Glass resigned from his trade union and from the SAAEO — and his retirement was noted with regret by the executive of that body.<sup>8</sup>

In view of what was to happen later it must be stressed again that Glass and Andrews were then, and later, close friends. That is until 1928 when Glass responded to the journal, the *Militant*, published by former members of the Communist Party of America who had resigned and joined the Left Opposition (or followers of Leon Trotsky). The letter was written to provide a background to the situation in South Africa and stated his position against the Black Republic slogan. He also sent his copy of the journal to Manuel Lopes in Cape Town, the one person who had encouraged Glass to write for the left press (at that time the *Bolshevik*) in Cape Town in the early 1920s.<sup>9</sup>

This was the end of Glass's collaboration with Andrews and henceforth everything he did politically in Johannesburg was in opposition to the CPSA. But this was not the end of Glass's association with the leaders of the ICU. It seems most likely that the remarkable introduction to the ICU Economic and Political Program for 1928 was written by Glass. The opening passage was not only militant, but also asserted the centrality of the black workers in the struggle in South Africa:

Opponents of the ICU have frequently asserted that the Organization is not a trade union in the sense that the term is generally understood in South Africa, but that it is a kind of pseudo-political body . . . The new constitution . . . definitely establishes the ICU as a trade union, albeit one of native workers . . . at the same time it must be clearly

understood that we have no intention of copying the stupid and futile 'non-political' attitude of our white contemporaries. As Karl Marx said, every economic question is, in the last analysis, a political question also, and we must recognise that in neglecting to concern ourselves with current politics, in leaving the political machine to the unchallenged control of our class enemies, we are rendering a disservice to those tens of thousands of our members who are groaning under oppressive laws . . . At the present stage of our development it is inevitable that our activities should be almost of an agitational character, for we are not recognised as citizens in our own country, being almost entirely disfranchised and debarred from exercising a say in state affairs closely affecting our lives and welfare.

Despite the sentiments expressed, the ICU was not organized as a trade union and its days were already numbered when the constitution was drafted. The corruption that La Guma had uncovered by 1926 had already destroyed any possibility of effective functioning and Glass was to play no further role in its activities. But its importance for this essay is the position Glass had taken on the role of the black worker.

There the matter would have rested if it had not been for the discussion of this period by R K Cope in his biography of Bill Andrews.<sup>10</sup>

### *On Rewriting History*

When Cope's book appeared in 1944 it was a landmark in working class publication in South Africa. This was the first book that purported to tell the story of the communists of South Africa. It concentrated on the life of one man but, in the absence of any other published history, it provided new material about events that were otherwise unknown to most readers. This was the first published account of the early years of the Labour Party and then, in successive steps, an account of the events leading to the formation of the Communist Party. Those of us outside the CPSA who read the book in 1944, rejected the slavish adulation of the USSR and the Comintern, but were pleased to have some history of the left in South Africa. We also wanted to know more about Andrews, who had been expelled from the CPSA in 1931, and who had been reinstated and was chairman of the party — a party that had achieved respectability by virtue of its support for the war effort.

We were not altogether convinced. There were strange jumps in the book for which there were no explanations. It was stated that Andrews was the secretary of the CPSA in 1924. Then, without mention of the party conference, Cope stated on page 296 that Andrews went back to his trade as a fitter in Johannesburg in 1925. There were other problems that were fudged by Cope, but we ignored them. This was the kind of history published by members or sympathisers of the CPSA and we expected no better of Cope.

It was only when I started a study of Frank Glass in 1989 that I noticed, for the first time, a strange omission in Cope's book. In the short section

dealing with the period 1924-30 Glass, Fanny Klenerman and Eva Green are never mentioned. The campaign to affiliate to the SALP, the joint work in the trade unions, and so on are expunged. Even in referring to the expulsions from the CPSA of 1931, which included Andrews, S P Bunting, and others, Cope does not mention Fanny (Klenerman) Glass. Andrews' speech at the ICU meeting in 1927 is quoted but Glass's address is not mentioned, and the suing of Matthews is also missing.

It was only in 1992 that I found a statement, written by Andrews that seemed to provide explanations of the inconsistencies. This old stalwart of the party, one time member of the ECCI, was accused in 1931 of breaching party discipline by attending a May Day rally organized by the Johannesburg United May Day Committee. In his defence, Andrews stated that he had always maintained his 'revolutionary' position and, to this end, he reproduced the text of the speech he had delivered in 1927 at the ICU meeting. Glass's speech was excluded. Cope obviously quoted extensively from the document, not stating his source, and providing only the evidence that Andrews chose to relate.<sup>11</sup> Andrews also stated that he had sued Matthews, a statement that I have not been able to confirm, but again, there is no mention of Glass's role.

None of this helped Andrews at the time. He was ignominiously expelled from the party he had helped to form. He was not an oppositionist and could be expected to accept every new party line. He could also be expected to turn his back on his closest friends if the party demanded it of him. What is important for an understanding of the way members of the CPSA acted is Andrews' selective recording of events to exclude all reference to Glass, his former close comrade and friend, and to even adopt his friend's actions as his own. Glass as a Trotskyist could be obliterated from the record, Fanny Klenerman, Glass's wife and Eva Green, Andrews' one-time lover, could be junked.

In Cope's partial defence it must be said that he interviewed Andrews extensively and received many of the documents he needed for the writing of the book from Andrews. He should have checked against other sources but did not do so. But there is little to be said for Andrews. He used the methods he learnt in the Communist International, lying when necessary in an attempt to save his own position. Compared to the record of the men arraigned in the Moscow Trials of 1937, this was a small lie. In Moscow there was a systematic use of falsehood, leading to the condemnation of those who stood accused in the dock and their inevitable execution.

In terms of South African history the lies used by 'Comrade Bill' introduced a procedure that has marked much of communist writing. Lies, small and large, are apparently permissible to boost the record of that party. If in the process others are maligned or written out of history texts that does not concern such scribes.

In early 1931 Glass sailed for China. The reasons for his going will be discussed in my study of his life — but he was not in the country and had

Andrews' statement been disclosed he was too far away to intervene, or even care about what was said. Glass knew only too well how men had been corrupted by their work for the Comintern.

A history that deliberately excludes people and events is no better than a history that lies. It should have no place in the annals of the socialist movement. Now it must be said: *it is time to set the record straight.*

## References

1. Letter from Suzy Weissman to the author. Suzy spoke to Glass, at a Los Angeles sanatorium in 1986, and asked him questions on my behalf, about his South African years. Unfortunately Glass died shortly after this conversation.
2. Department of Justice files, on microfilm at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London.
3. See the article on the 1922 strike in this issue of Searchlight South Africa.
4. Tom Mbeki, originally a member of the Young Communist League, and then a leading member of the ICU, was mentioned in police files as an informer. It is not certain when he assumed this role, but it seems most likely that his craving for alcohol led to his accepting money from the police.
5. See B Hirson and L Vivian, *Strike Across the Empire: The Seamen's Strike of 1925 in Britain, South Africa and Australasia*, Clio Publications, 1992.
6. Report in the *Rand Daily Mail*, 28 March 1927. This incident and the text of the speech was first noted by Peter Wickens, who mentioned it in his history of the ICU, p 131. Wickens did not seem to have known of Cope's book (see above), which was probably banned and unavailable in South Africa when he wrote his book.
7. A fuller account of the activities of Cecil Frank Glass will be found in my book, tentatively entitled *Revolutionary in Three Continents*, forthcoming.
8. The court documents are available in the State archives, Pretoria
9. See the letter from Lopes to Andrews (below) when he was invited to assist in the formation of the Friends of the Soviet Union.
10. See bibliography for details of publisher, etc
11. Roux does offer some account of the 1924 conference in his biography of S P Bunting, but the account is skimpy and provides no details of the position taken by Glass.

## Bibliography

- R K Cope (c1944) *Comrade Bill: The Life and Times of W H Andrews, Worker's Leader*, Stewart Printers, Cape Town.
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## THE 'FRIENDS OF THE SOVIET UNION'

### A Letter from M Lopes to Bill Andrews, 1931.<sup>1</sup>

Manuel Lopes was a pioneer members of the Industrial Socialist League in Cape Town, formed in 1916. Manuel became editor of *The Bolshevik*, and one of the first to recognize the talent of Frank Glass.



Lopes was a member of the CPSA from its inception, secretary of the Cape Town section and a keen supporter of the revolutionary agenda of the new Russian state. However, Lopes was also one of the first in South Africa to recognize that socialism could not be built in an isolated backward state.

Although disillusioned by what he perceived to have gone wrong in Russia, Manuel stayed in the CPSA until expelled for opposing the 'Black Republic' slogan. But when he found no alternative organization, and could find no place in which to build a socialist movement, he veered to the right and joined the Afrikaner based National Party.

There is no excuse for people, steeped in the ideas of the left, who move over to the far right. But so deep was their disillusionment in what they saw coming out of Russia, and those falsehoods repeated by men like Andrews that they abandoned all hope of a socialist agenda. In this they were not unlike intellectuals like Koestler and Silone who rejected communism and contributed essays in the volume, *The God that Failed*. The tragedy is that the process is being repeated today by men and women who watch in despair as the countries they once believed to be socialist, are shown to have been primitive and backwards, unable to compete economically with, never mind outstrip, the west.

In seeing through the fraud represented by those who led organizations like Friends of the Soviet Union in 1931, Lopes still argued in the language of his time. This was borrowed partly from the writings of Leon Trotsky whose criticism of the Stalin regime was still bounded by the belief that the achievements of the revolution of 1917 could be rescued, if only there was a working class movement to rally support for the regime. Lopes might have been correct, but we will never know: the working class movement he called for was never established.

Andrews wrote to Lopes shortly before his own expulsion, suggesting that a branch of the Friends of the Soviet Union be opened in Cape Town in a demonstration of his loyalty to the CPSA and the Comintern. The original has not been found, but Lopes' reply, printed here, was found in the files of the Trades and Labour Council.

**Dear Com Andrews,**

Many thanks for the reply received from you re Diamond's case which I regret to see is moving towards an unhappy climax. If I can be of any further use, please let me know. Whilst writing, may I state that my brother [also a former member of the CPSA] and I are always keen to be of service to any section of the worker's movement and that at any time we can be of service to you or to the organizations you represent, please let us know. I have read with interest the manifesto of the proposed 'Friends of Soviet Russia' and have considered your invitation to establish a branch here.

A branch [of the FSU] has been established here already, and we are invited to participate but probably could not give it our active support. For the life of me, I cannot see the necessity of militants giving their time and energies to such an organization whilst the political field is left open to opportunists masquerading in the name of Labour and Socialism. You cannot hope to advance the case of militant Labour in South Africa by such a procedure. The defence of the achievements of the Russian workers and peasants can be, and *must* be, in the programme of a real worker's party. of which it forms an important part but yet, *only a part*.

First things first: a real worker's party needs all our time and attention and such a party would undoubtedly support the defence of the USSR, but a separate organization based on such an isolated appeal is unnecessary and at present unjustified.

I may state that the above point of view is that held by a large section of the Left, more especially by the followers of Leon Trotsky.

As I am writing to you personally, may I add that the manifesto reiterates many of the exaggerations broadcast by the ruling regime in Russia. 'Socialism by leaps and bounds' is simply *non est* in Russia today and the slogan 'overtaking and outstripping' capitalist countries is all bunkum and as misleading as the principle of Socialism in one country. Socialism cannot exist in one country any more than capitalism can exist in one country, and the question of Socialism in Russia is one that will find an answer only in the arena of the world revolution. From this view again we see the relative weakness of such bodies as 'Friends of the USSR' with their boasting of Stalinist propaganda and the prime necessity of developing the class consciousness of the workers to the end of the creation of a real worker's revolutionary party which today in South Africa does not exist.

I am sending under separate cover a journal which I am distributing locally and which is devoted to the propagation of the above point of view.

With best wishes,

I remain,

Yours faithfully,

Manuel Lopes.

## References

1. This letter, found in the files of the Trades and Labour Council was sent to us by Kevin French.
2. Diamond, a member of the CPSA appeared in court on a charge of 'inciting to violence' after leading a procession of white and black workers on the May Day in 1931 for which Andrews was expelled from the party. Several party members received prison sentences and Diamond received a twelve months prison sentence.