

Biography: Robert Cedric Wilcox

Politicised family milieu

Robert Cedric Wilcox (fondly called Bobby) was born in January 1938 as the youngest in a working-class family of eight children/siblings (4 sisters and 4 brothers). The Wilcox family lived on Bath Road in Wynberg, a neighbourhood in the southern suburbs of greater Cape Town. After one year of preschool, little Robert went to Broad Road Primary School and thereafter progressed to Livingstone High School (like all other Wilcox siblings) in Claremont where he would finish his matric. Before the Nationalist Party came to power in 1948, segregation was government policy, viciously enforced through racialized schooling. But Broad Road primary was on the boundary between Wynberg and Kenilworth, so it was far from unusual to encounter kids categorized as 'white' (from the Phillipi farmers) attending this primary school back then. Against the backdrop of Robert's childhood happiness, he also witnessed a world in turmoil. He observed the food shortages that World War Two (WW2) brought with it. With his childhood mates they played out the headline news of the day in their innocent war games. Alongside his brother Gerry and other youngsters (aged 10-12) they enjoyed the occasional handing out of handbills or pamphlets advertising political rallies as fun, rather than political agitation. As an onlooker of what was going on around him, he was far too young to comprehend the political significance of the turbulence that shook the world during the 1940s.

Bobby matriculated in 1955 but without any noteworthy and organized political involvement while he was a student at Livingstone high. In an era when most people had left school at standard 8 or earlier, obtaining a matric certificate with good grades in natural sciences was a big achievement and celebrated. It opened prospects for university admission and specializing in a scientific discipline. Instead of going to university, Bobby decided to follow in the footsteps of his brothers and found a job as an industrial worker, though for him this proved to be untenable.

During Bobby's years at Livingstone High, he sold copies of the journal published by the Society of Young Africa (SOYA) to fellow students. Two of his sisters, Edna and Gwen, were active SOYA members and supplied him with a batch of each new issue of the journal to sell at school. Escaping from attending public mass meetings that the NEUM held on the grand parade in Cape Town was impossible. The Wilcox siblings active in the NEUM structures almost dragged Bobby along to these electrifying public gatherings. Orators of the Movement, such as IB Tabata, NT Honono, Goolam Gool and Leo Sihlali, delivered political analyses that captivated the crowds attracted to these meetings.

The family milieu nurtured Bobby's political outlook into his teenage years as his understanding of a segregated and repressive society sharpened. In that era, racist stereotyping and discrimination was rife in Wynberg and surrounding neighbourhoods. Needless to say, the Wilcox household rejected racism, accepting full equality among all human beings. This principled outlook made them stand out as a unique political family. Almost all Wilcox sisters and brothers fulfilled leadership roles in organizations affiliated to the NEUM/Unity Movement. His parents encouraged Joyce, their oldest daughter, to enroll at the University of Cape Town (UCT). Whilst studying at UCT, Joyce became involved in politics through the New Era Fellowship (NEF), a forum for discussion where prominent freedom fighters were invited to present papers. Eventually, she also drew Gwen and Edna into the NEF. Edna and Gwen, eminent

Society of Young Africa (SOYA) militants, were instrumental in organizing the boycott of van Riebeeck's tricentenary held on 6 April 1952. Part of this victory involved winning over the Cape Malay Choir to also boycott this commemoration of colonization which the Coloured Affairs Department (CAD) funded. With the passage of time, the sisters also invited Alfie, the second eldest brother, to NEF meetings. Alfie was an apprentice in the Simonstown dockyard and qualified as a carpenter/cabinetmaker in 3 instead of 4 years. When the African People's Democratic Union of Southern Africa (APDUSA) was founded in 1961, he became its national General Secretary. Jimmy was an executive member of APDUSA in Cape Town, with Freda elected as treasurer of the same branch.

Cape Peninsula Students Union (CPSU) – emergence and decline [1957-1962/3]

In 1959, Bobby began his first year as a science degree student at UCT (majoring in Mathematics) and then joined the CPSU, immediately shouldering vital organizational duties. Shortly after joining CPSU, members elected him to serve as the organisation's treasurer. He quickly emerged as a prominent speaker at public meetings to represent the collective voice of the CPSU before he was elected its chairperson in 1961. He married Antoinette (Toni) Stoffberg in 1964, who herself has a history of political activism. Building the CPSU demanded a lot of time and energy, particularly from those in its leadership. Striking a balance between intensified CPSU activism and a burgeoning academic workload became untenable. At the heart of this tension, we encounter a gifted and diligent student basically neglecting his studies with its inevitable consequences. It is not a surprise that in the second year of study it was difficult to repeat the excellent academic achievements of the first year. Bobby dropped out of UCT and rejoined the battle to find a job in 1961.

The CPSU was established in 1957, two years before Bobby became a member. In this period (1957-1960), the CPSU attracted a considerable number of new members with its biggest branches in Grassy Park, Salt River, Athlone and Cape Town. Since its inception it was an independent organization that students ran on their own, a strategy that appealed to a broad range of issues confronting students. The CPSU mobilised students around diverse issues (*like the District 6 street parade and other cultural events*) but heightened political awareness was a distinctive feature of its organizational priorities. By 1960 the CPSU had also united with the Durban Students Union.

While the CPSU only affiliated with the All-African Convention (AAC) in 1961, its student leadership was under the influence of NEUM/Unity Movement's politics. At a public meeting in 1959, Bobby's speech on behalf of the CPSU underscored the urgency and reasons for working together with teachers. Ensuing debates on solidarity and unity in teacher/school education struggles became overshadowed by the split raging in the NEUM. Battles for principled liberatory politics reached acute intensity at UCT in the late-fifties and early-sixties. It centered on uprooting the infiltration of liberal politics in student protests that bodies such as the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) propagated. The objective effect of political liberalism that NUSAS represented was to derail and crush the liberatory movement of oppressed, dispossessed and repressed people. At Fort Hare University, the Society of Young Africa (SOYA) group was at the forefront in the battle for the university to disaffiliate from NUSAS. SOYA at Fort Hare organized a two-day conference aimed at unmasking the insidiousness of liberalism. SOYA invited and hosted a CPSU delegation. Fellow students at Fort Hare received the six CPSU delegates (including Bobby) with

comradely warmth. Among the hundreds of students who participated in this tumultuous engagement were ANC members who, more than a decade later, vividly reflected on its positive impact when they reminisced about that gathering as political prisoners on Robben Island.

Arrest, imprisonment and release

APDUSA (the African People's Democratic Union of Southern Africa) was established in January 1961. It immediately attracted a number of members across the country. Included were former and current members of the CPSU. The ability of APDUSA members to organise was severely curtailed by police monitoring and surveillance. In Cape Town the organisation was active in the southern suburbs as well as Langa. Bobby got involved in efforts to link up with his comrades in Natal and the Transkei as well as Johannesburg.

With the political ferment in the country rising, the leadership of the movement undertook national as well as international trips to build a stronger organisational network.

The arrest of close to 200 members of APDUSA in 1971 made local and international headlines. After spending a period in detention at Leeuwkop Prison in the then Transvaal, Bobby and his comrades were brought to court on Terrorism charges. He was sent to a term of six years imprisonment on Robben Island.

The prison years were spent carrying forward the ideas and programme of the APDUSA in prison itself. There were high levels of camaraderie amongst the political prisoners, together with the mutual respect members of different organisations had for one another. In this they had no choice because prison authorities were always intent on sowing divisions amongst them. Other liberation organisations like the PAC, SWAPO and the ANC (and much later, the Black Consciousness Movement) worked with the APDUSA members through democratically elected committees to make prison life more bearable. Attempts by the authorities to enforce racist discriminatory measures amongst prisoners, were steadfastly resisted and overcome. Prison life compelled prisoners to be innovative/creative in obtaining news from outside the prison walls. Much time was also spent on formal classes - presented by prisoners like Bobby, to other prisoners - in a variety of subjects such as Accounting, Statistics and Psychology. He succeeded in completing his BSc degree in Mathematics and Information Systems towards the end of his prison term.

Political life after release from prison (1977)

After having served six years in Robben Island Prison, Bobby tackled the arduous task of rebuilding the APDUSA; mostly on his own and sometimes with former comrades or members of APDUSA. This rebuilding found expression in re-establishing contact with former members (from the 1960s), organising contact with comrades in other parts of the country (N Cape, E Cape/Transkei, Natal and Gauteng) and eventually organising national executive committee meetings. One such member from Cape Town was Frikkie Janeke who became a consistent and key member in the western Cape and the national organisation for many years to come. Mr Janeke and Bobby became close comrades in arms and were involved in countless battles (e.g. the struggles on the sport front/SACOS) in which the politics of the APDUSA / UMSA were systematically propagated.

Establishing links with the exiled leadership was an extension of the wide range of efforts Bobby undertook successfully. He was elected as one of two joint-secretaries of the UMSA in one of the numerous meetings held in Harare, Zimbabwe. In parallel with these endeavours, attempts were made to re-engage with those who left the movement due to the 1958 split. The outcome of this initiative saw the establishment of a separate organisation which is today known as the New Unity Movement (NUM) which was distinct from APDUSA and the UMSA. The publishing function of the organisation was initially started by Bobby; it later incorporated other members and developed to a point in the 1980s where bulk production of publications (newsletters and pamphlets) became the norm. Systematic propaganda was conducted against UDF politics, focussing heavily on the political betrayal that was imminent. Besides his involvement in struggles in defence of SACOS, there were interactions with Black Consciousness Movement individuals as well. One aspect that always rose to the surface in these interactions was the primacy of a political programme that could serve as a guide to political action as many of the structures that emerged, sadly lacked a coherent political programme.

Leading into the 1990s, and beyond

The late 1980s and early 1990s saw the changing political environment (release of political prisoners; unbanning of organisations; high level political negotiations etc) prompting changes in the political orientation of the Movement. Bobby and other members ensured that the position of the APDUSA on a negotiated political settlement was clearly heard at the historic CODESA conference. At the 1995 conference of APDUSA a transitional set of political demands was adopted in response to changing political circumstances. Bobby formed part of the committee that oversaw this process. At the time the question of the reestablishment of the Workers Party of South Africa (WPSA) arose again after initial efforts to re-establish it in Harare. There was a short period during which the party was re-established with Bobby and Kwezi Tshangana being members who were inside the country at the time. The WPSA managed to publish two editions of *Ikewzi Lomso* but subsequently suspended activities. Subsequently, Bobby initiated the establishment of the T Club (Tabata Club) which later became the Workers Forum of South Africa (WFSA). The forum endeavours to train members in revolutionary Marxism. Also, it endeavours to, on the basis of contestation of ideas, develop the analytical abilities of its members. One major achievement of the WFSA was the publication of its theses which explains its *raison d'être*.

Bobby's leadership role/participation in the APF, (which later became part of the Social Movement Indaba (SMI) ensured that progressive ideas on the need for a political programme and unity in struggle countered ideas such as Socialism from Below; an idea propagated by leftists who used it as a convenient escape hatch to ostensibly fight the influence of bureaucratic Stalinist ideas on organisations. Similarly, the World Social Forum (WSF) resolution to exclude political organisations resulted in the eventual formation of the Radical Left Network (RLN) in South Africa. Bobby was central in the establishment, growth and execution of the programme of activity of the RLN. The Democratic Left Front (DLF) was yet another attempt at organisational collaboration, involving trade unions such as the Commercial, Stevedoring and Allied Workers union (CSAAWU). Again, Bobby involved himself wholeheartedly in these developments. As before, the barrier to progress proved to be the lack of a political

programme and limiting struggles to specific issues, proponents arguing that people must develop their own programmes based on their own struggles.

Marikana, in 2012 set in motion developments pertaining to the establishment of organisations purporting to be part of a United Front – spearheaded by NUMSA. Bobby wrote a paper on this phenomenon in 1999 for the benefit of the organisation’s membership. This was but one of many similar articles, conference papers and newsletter articles he contributed to the publications of the Movement over a period of many decades. Serving as president of the APDUSA for many years from the 1990s to the 2010s, his presidential addresses always highlighted pertinent political matters of interest to the struggle of the South African oppressed and exploited. His computer technology background stood him in good stead when the organisation embarked on, and eventually established a fully-fledged website for APDUSA. This was an organisational project he devoted many hours and much effort to. Themes of his Presidential Addresses trace the evolution of the international struggle for socialism.

The WFSA: laying the basis for the formation of a workers’ party in South Africa

At the time of his 88th birthday (in January 2026) Bobby was very much occupied with the need for the WFSA to expand and raise its organisational profile. The scientific nature of Socialism and the importance of understanding the necessity of a workers’ party to assume leadership of the struggle for Socialism, were themes he consistently and rightfully emphasised.

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