

James Madhlope Phillips 1919 - 1987

The African National Congress and the liberation movement suffered a grievous loss when one of its most outstanding members in the cultural field - James Madhlope Phillips - died suddenly on 22nd October 1987.

James, the people's artist, was born into a working class family on 11th December 1919 in the vibrant ghetto of Sophiatown - the Harlem of Johannesburg. The early death of his father brought great hardship to the family. He worked as a waiter and garden boy for his education in Lovedale. Later he worked in the garment industry and soon became a leading trade unionist. By 1940 he was elected chairman of the Garment Workers' Union of the Transvaal.

In 1941 he was a founder member of the Transvaal Council of Non-European Trade Unions, the first independent black trade union centre in the country, which later was to transform itself into SACTU. At the time he was also the treasurer of the Transvaal Affiliate of the African People's Organisation, the organisation founded by the illustrious Dr. Abdur Rahman (the grandson of a slave) in the Cape in 1902.

Also in 1940 James joined the Communist Party of South Africa. His reputation as one of the gallant defenders of the party's weekly platform on the Johannesburg City Hall steps became well known. James was amongst those who physically warded off the fascist attacks of the Ossawabrandwag and the Grey Shirts. More often than not the fascists retreated with bloody noses and cauliflower ears.

Midst his multi-organisational activities James also found time to follow his one great passion - Singing (the other one was weight lifting). He soon became known as 'South Africa's Paul Robeson'. He sang freedom, socialist and labour songs. Invariably at benefit concerts there were requests for 'Old Man River'. On numerous occasions he was accompanied by one of South Africa's most distinguished pianists Bruno Raikin.

The post-war years brought increasing and crushing hardship on the oppressed working people. Amongst the worst affected were the African mine workers. They were paid no more than 2 shillings and 3 pence per shift (12 1/5p) working on Sundays at normal rate and without any annual paid leave. They were herded into compounds and barred from contact with city workers. At work they were subjected to ruthless indunas/boss boys and white miners who frequently assaulted them.

Periodically there were spontaneous retaliations by the workers in the form of counter defence or industrial action. Coming to their aid and under much harassment and police surveillance was the African Mine Workers' Union founded in the early 40s by the legendary J. B. Marks. In 1946 the Union decided the time had come for a show-down with the mining barons who refused to budge at repeated representations made for improved working and pay conditions.

On Monday 12th August 70,000 workers laid down tools for their demands which included a ten shilling rise (50p) per shift, two weeks annual paid leave, and better and safer working conditions. As a back-up the union had set up the Mine Workers' Strike Fund with James as the chairman. When the strike took place (as described in Sechaba by James at the time of the 40th anniversary in August 1986) the police opened fire and brutally assaulted the workers. Eight were killed and over a thousand injured. Within a week the strike was smashed and the entire union leadership and the members of the Central Committee of the Communist Party were arrested.

Progressive opinion was outraged. Dr. A. B. Xuma, the president-general of the ANC bitterly summed up the situation : 'When our people ask for bread, they get lead.'

The great miners' strike led to a renaissance in the ANC. It accelerated the anger of the ANC Youth League for urgent action. Members of the Native Representative Council resigned in protest to the killings. The outcome was the emergence of a new and dynamic leadership of Sisulu, Tambo and Mandela which radicalized the ANC.

For his involvement in the strike James was given a suspended sentence, which didn't deter him from continuing his political work within the Congress movement. He was to play a valuable part in the launching of the 'Defiance Against Unjust Laws Campaign' in 1952. For this he was arrested with other campaign leaders and accused of 'having incited the people to sing' and again given a suspended sentence.

In 1950 the Nationalist Party introduced the Suppression of Communism Act and through this far reaching act they set about initially to smash the progressive trade union movement and the Communist Party.

It did not matter whether the would be victims were communists or not, what matters was whether they had a track record of being anti-Nationalist. One such person was Solly Sachs, the General Secretary of the militant and anti-fascist Garment Workers' Union. He fought the disruptive activities of the fascists, the Dutch Reformed Church and their newspapers like 'Die Transvaaler' and 'Die Vaderland'. The other marked man was James. The government slapped stringent banning orders on him and Sachs.

The garment workers, 'Coloured', 'Indian' and 'White' displayed seething anger at a protest meeting of many thousands on the Johannesburg City Hall steps. The police hid in the City Hall and fascists mingled in the angry but peaceful crowd. Suddenly the police pounced on the people and the fascist set to work. Skulls cracked, limbs smashed and blood spouted in an orgy of violence. The victims were mainly working women.

James was now prohibited from taking an active part in the union which he helped to build, and whose chairman he had been for 13 consecutive years.

The banning order made life difficult for James. He could not find employment, nor give or go to any concerts, or attend meetings, and denied association with his colleagues in the trade and liberation movements he was helped to leave South Africa illegally and made his way to England in 1954.

In England he found work in the garment industry as a cutter. He set up home in the 60s with his first wife Maud and their home became virtually the ANC UK quarters long before an office was set up. Just like his father's home had been a regular meeting place for the founder members of the ANC. At their home in London refugees arrived for food, shelter and care: G. B. Marks, Robert Resha, Dan Thlome, Alf Hutchinson, the Tambo family, and many more found shelter there.

In his spare time he undertook benefit shows for progressive and trade union organisations and always supported the causes of the oppressed. Be it concerts for 'The Campaign for Colonial Freedom', a fundraising for Vietnam or the 'Free Angela Davis Campaign'. The examples are endless.

In the mid sixties the ANC sent James to do a course in trade union studies in the German Democratic Republic. Whilst in the GDR he travelled widely entertaining workers. Together with the American singer Perry Friedman they set up the 'Hootenanny Club', the cradle of the GDR song movement, which is well known today as the Oktober Club.

In 1970 James took part in the successful show 'South Africa 70' at the Unity theatre. Subsequently he together with a number of fellow congress members like Barry Feinberg, Ronny Kasrils, Palo Jordan, John Matshikiza, Billy Nannan and others formed 'Mayibuye', the cultural unit of the ANC, which read poetry, sung and did short sketches on life in South Africa, touring Britain, Ireland and the continent raising funds for the ANC throughout the 70s. All this cultural work had to be fitted into a tight schedule as James and most members of Mayibuye had to hold down full time jobs at the same time to earn their living.

James was helped in keeping his schedules and scripts by his second wife Andrea, who also acted as his secretary.

In 1980 when James was in his early 60s he bounded out with a new burst of energy. Having long realized the importance of the cultural work for the movement and the rich history contained in the people's songs, he started skillfully training choirs in West Germany, Holland, Belgium, Sweden, Wales and the United States to sing the South African liberation songs in the indigenous languages of the people of South Africa. At the same time he taught them the history of the people's struggle putting each song into its historical context. Thus the message of the liberation movement was relayed to tens of thousands of people.

Recordings of the liberation songs were made in the Netherlands and Germany. Some of these recordings made their way to Brandford where Winnie Mandela was exiled and later blared out in her Orlando township home.

As mourners arrived at the Golders' Green Crematorium they heard the voice of Paul Robeson, who had always been an inspiration to James, singing 'The Ballad of Joe Hill', who was an American labour leader. Before Joe Hill was executed he sent out a message 'Don't mourn, organise!' 61 years later the heroic children of Soweto sent out the message which echoed around the world 'Don't mourn, mobilize!'

It was in this spirit that the vast crowd of Congress members, Anti-Apartheid activists, Communists, Labour party members, members of solidarity organisations, representatives of choirs from Holland, Germany and the USA, artists and writers, and friends, came to bid farewell to a much beloved artist, singer, socialist, labour leader and liberation fighter. Tributes were paid by comrades Mzwai Pilliso, Brian Bunting, Barry Feinberg. Poetry and songs by comrades Wally Serote, John Matshikiza and Nathan Dambuza, and Paul Joseph spoke as a family friend. The service was officiated by the chairman of the UK RPC comrade Steven Gawe.

At the time of his death James was working on the compilation of a history of the South African Liberation movement in song, as well as his memoirs, and it's hoped that both works will be completed by his second wife Andrea. James leaves two daughters and a son and two grandchildren.

The ANC dips its revolutionary banner in honour of a dear and outstanding comrade.

Paul Joseph

18 November 1987

