



SOLDIER OF MISFORTUNE

Carl Niehaus against the world

By Rebecca Davis • 12 February 2021



Carl Niehaus. (Photo: Gallo Images / Sunday Times / Jackie Clausen)

This week, Carl Niehaus led a group of supporters to former president Jacob Zuma's home. But within the ANC, Niehaus's days may be numbered — as signs are there that leadership is finally losing patience with the party's number one grifter.

Carl Niehaus was born on Christmas Day, like Jesus Christ. It's a comparison which, in all probability, he has entertained more than once in his 61 years of life. In his own mind, it is clear that Niehaus considers himself a martyr to a higher cause. To South Africa's white lefties in particular, he is an embarrassment. For journalists, he is low-hanging fruit.

Niehaus has popped up throughout South Africa's post-apartheid history in the manner of an increasingly ethically depleted Forrest Gump. Here he is as the MP, here he is as the spokesperson, here he is as the ambassador, here he is as the businessman, here he is as the former soldier. For every shift in the wind, there is a new Carl, with a back story newly retro-fitted to his new role.

But there are signs that even Teflon Carl may be running out of road. ANC Secretary-General Ace Magashule has publicly expressed unhappiness with the factionalism Niehaus foments. Niehaus has been effectively suspended from Luthuli House. Within the ANC, he is facing a raft of disciplinary charges including the agonising allegation that he brings "ridicule" on to the ruling party. Could Niehaus finally be on the ropes?

The absolute last person you should ask about this is Niehaus himself. Asking Niehaus anything is like interrogating sand. He lies about so much that it is increasingly difficult to separate the facts of his life from the fabrications. One of the lies he tells most frequently is that he was imprisoned for 10 years for his anti-apartheid activities. In reality, his period in jail was from November 1983 to March 1991. Why would he lie about something so easy to check?

"Pathological" is a word attached often to him. In interviews with his former comrades and ex-friends, the kindest description I heard of Niehaus was "complicated".

Here's the most endearing Niehaus-related anecdote I've encountered. It's from his 1993 autobiography, *Fighting For Hope*, which recounts how the young Carl's arrest for anti-apartheid political activism broke his conservative parents' hearts.

"The day [Niehaus's first wife] Jansie and I were sentenced, my father took my hands in his across the wooden rail of the dock. When we sat down again, there was a sweaty little note in my right hand. During lunch time in my cell I carefully opened it. With a blunt pencil he had written in his large handwriting: 'Courage, old pal. We'll tackle this thing together'."

Fighting For Hope is Niehaus at his most likeable. It is a slim, unpretentious memoir which is suffused throughout with love for his parents, for Jansie, for the landscape of his home province, the North West, and even for the Afrikaner people.

It is a reminder that Niehaus was once respected as a man of courage and principle who broke completely with his working-class Afrikaans origins to take up a militant fight against the apartheid government, plotting to blow up the Johannesburg Gas Works.

Because of his Afrikaner identity, he was the object of considerable fascination to both the local and international press. Vanity Fair described him at the time of his imprisonment through the leering lens normally reserved for film stars as "burly, with a tense, hard body, a stubborn jaw, a fringe of beard". Niehaus's mind, the magazine recorded, was "organised, analytical, attacking".

But talking to his former comrades — almost all of whom wished to stay anonymous because, they said, they did not have the energy to get into a tiff with Niehaus — it becomes clear that the young activist was never really one of the gang. White lefties working for the ANC in the early 80s tended to be English-speaking and more ideologically cosmopolitan than Niehaus, the farm-boy theology student. One told me that Niehaus, still steeped in the teachings of the NG Kerk, was at this time vehemently anti-gay. He was not, in any sense of the word, cool.

Niehaus was also not well trusted, even by the famously paranoid standards of the time. In a 2009 YouTube video, former South African Communist Party activist Gavin Evans cites Niehaus as someone suspected of being a spy. Evans also says, half laughing, that Niehaus "wasn't someone who had much strategic sense".

Other comrades put it more bluntly: Niehaus was a blowhard. That's what got him arrested — bragging to housemate Robert Whitecross, an apartheid spy, about his outlandish plan to blow up the gas works.

He arrived in prison every inch the dogmatic dominee in training, with hardline opinions on practically everything — even trivialities. A former comrade said Niehaus would tolerate only two kinds of music: jazz and classical music. Everything else was an abomination. He clashed with Rivonia trialist Denis Goldberg over Goldberg's decision to renounce violence against the apartheid state and thereby win early release. To Niehaus, this was an unforgivable betrayal.

But for all his certainties behind bars, the Niehaus that one ANC veteran encountered at the party's headquarters in the early days of unbanning was "humble, quiet, a bit out of place".

It's suggested that the seeds of Niehaus's undoing were sown when he failed to be made a minister in President Nelson Mandela's first democratic Cabinet — unlike another white Struggle activist, Derek Hanekom, with whom Niehaus has repeatedly clashed in recent years.

To quote Niehaus on Twitter in September 2020: "[Hanekom] served 2 years, I served 10 years of a 15 year sentence for high treason".

Niehaus had to make do with a parliamentary committee chairmanship. Scant reward, some might say, for sacrificing ten seven-and-a-bit years of freedom.



(Photo: Ihsaan Ilaffejee)

A visit to Niehaus's Twitter account is a reminder that it is not easy to be Carl Niehaus these days. He gets it from all sides. White racists tweet truly revolting slurs at him. A source told me that there is a sizeable component of racist Afrikaners in particular who rejoice at every new Niehaus failure because she mimicked their tone — *you see what happens when you side with the darkies*.

From younger black people, too, Niehaus gets it in the neck. His tendency to post militant quotes from Black Consciousness leaders is often greeted with irritation. Niehaus resorts to continuously referencing his Struggle credentials. In response to those who insist on pointing out his skin colour, he has lately developed a new comeback: "Ask my true comrades if they only, and simply, see me as a conventional white man."

Even under provocation on social media, his language retains an old-fashioned formality. The rudest insult I have ever seen him tweet was, in July 2020, the phrase "idiotic butthead".

On Facebook, Niehaus has taken to recording regular videos with his thoughts on political events. In them, his speech is very precise and utterly humourless. It is clear that he has taken to regarding himself as an elder historian of the ANC: he spouts facts and dates about the party's past with the same dogmatic intensity with which he might have quoted Bible verses as a young theology student.

In the background of his videos, the photos that are visible in his apartment are all of Nelson Mandela. One, which Niehaus posts on social media on regular occasions, is of Madiba awarding him a medal.

Niehaus says his relationship with Mandela was one of the most important of his life. Mandela's former personal assistant Zelda la Grange told me it wasn't reciprocated.

The last time we saw [Niehaus] was in the mid-2000s when he came to Madiba for financial help," La Grange said.

"Madiba said no and we never saw him again."

The mid-to-late 2000s seems to be the period of Niehaus's life which a Niehaus historian might identify as "the part when the wheels start coming off".

It is at this point that the narrative of Carl Niehaus switches genre and becomes a cautionary tale: a morality fable about weak men who succumb to the temptations of the flesh.

What caused it? It depends who you ask. Some say that his decision to leave his first wife, Jansie, marks the moment when Niehaus's life began to go off course. (Nobody has a bad word to say about Jansie, who was also jailed for her anti-apartheid activism and has now slipped from public view.)

Niehaus would go on to date and marry a series of much younger women, and it's suggested that the pressure to lead a suitably glamorous life to maintain their interest led him further and further into debt.

Others say Niehaus simply decided, as per the now-infamous Smuts Ngonyama quote, that he had not struggled to be poor. A comrade told me that Niehaus would use his substantial powers of manipulation to persuade people to give or lend him money, arguing that he had missed the chance to "feather his nest" by spending all those years in prison.

"He just became a really shit friend," a former Niehaus pal remembered: the kind of friend who calls you up only either to brag about their possessions and lifestyle or to hit you up for a loan.

This was while Niehaus was employed as ANC spokesperson, a job at which he was, by almost all accounts, very good. Someone who was impressed by him was investigative journalist Pearlie Joubert, who also remembers him as being "incredibly nice and pleasant" at that time.

"Then the stories started coming thick and fast about him borrowing money," Joubert told me.

It was she who would break the bombshell story in the *Mail & Guardian* in 2009 that Niehaus owed hundreds of thousands of rands to politicians and businessmen and had committed fraud while working for the Gauteng provincial government. Confronted with her allegations, Niehaus burst into tears and confessed it all.

Looking back now, Joubert feels little sense of triumph at her journalistic coup.

"Although I worked hard on that story, it did feel like kicking a man when he's down," she reflects.

"It was very hard to be gung-ho about it."

She points out that Niehaus may have been the "first and last" ANC politician to confess to stealing money.



Carl Niehaus at the State Capture Inquiry. (Photo: Greg Nicolson)

Niehaus was never criminally charged with stealing money: a defence he advances on social media whenever anyone raises the fraud issue. He resigned as ANC spokesperson in disgrace and disappeared from the spotlight. It was a period which must have been painful for a man who reportedly craves the attention of the media as validation of his own importance.

Around 2017, however, Carl was back with a vengeance, touring the country as the unofficial spokesperson for ANC presidential candidate Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma. It was at this time too that Niehaus adopted his uniform of military fatigues as the spokesperson of the uMkhonto weSizwe Veterans Association — despite repeated claims by critics that Niehaus himself never played a role in MK. (In historian Thula Simpson's authoritative *Umkhonto we Sizwe: The ANC's Armed Struggle*, Niehaus does not receive a single mention.)

This was the period in which Niehaus began to serve as a lone white praise-singer for former president Jacob Zuma. Among his former comrades, even those used to Niehaus's shape-shifting, this move has been confounding: they say that Zuma and Niehaus had no bond, and no contact, during the Struggle.

Why Niehaus became Zuma's defender-in-chief was one of the questions I most wanted to put to him, and he agreed to be interviewed under certain "parameters". These parameters, it was tacitly understood, meant that I would not ask him about his string of fraud

allegations from 2009. I would not ask him about his departure from Rhema Church owing more than half a million rand.

I would not ask him about his lies that first his mother, and then his father, had died in order to borrow money. I would not ask him about the allegation that he lived rent-free in Zimbali Lodge during the NDZ campaign on the understanding of fixing everyone up with government jobs when she won, and then skipped out on the bill overnight when she didn't.

I would not ask him about his widely disbelieved claim to have been gang-raped in prison. I would not ask him about the multiple occasions on which he has purported to have terminal illnesses, again in order to shirk obligations.

We would, for the duration of our phone conversation, occupy Carl's World: a more pleasant version of reality where the media still treated him with respect and nobody viewed him as a faintly hilarious conman.

There's an incident I haven't mentioned yet which casts some light on the evolution of Niehaus's political thought in the post-apartheid era.

In 1999, Niehaus co-authored a "Declaration of Commitment by White South Africans" with former TRC commissioner Mary Burton. It was a public apology by whites for the sins of the past, and a vow to atone both spiritually and practically (through the payment of some form of reparations).

Niehaus had believed that white South Africans would be flocking to sign the declaration. The reality was, unfortunately, quite different.

A *Time* article of the time records that the declaration was sent to dissident Afrikaner poet Breyten Breytenbach to sign. Breytenbach, who had also been jailed under apartheid, responded that after reading the document, he "went to the bathroom for a quiet, sad puke. Must be something I ate".

22 years later, Niehaus is still pissed. It's one of the first things he brings up on the phone to me: not Breytenbach's response in particular, but the unenthusiastic reaction of most South African whites.

"The response to that campaign really shocked me," Niehaus said.

"We got next to no support for it. Instead, we got rejection and a lot of ridicule. That played quite a critical role in my mind about hardening my views on the issue of white racism."

Niehaus's growing alienation from the Afrikaner community and from his own extended family has, he says, pushed him further into the embrace of the African National Congress.

'In many ways I actually think of the ANC as my family," he says, which worries me a little, because there is every indication that his ANC family may be about to cast him to the wind.

Or will the protection of former president Jacob Zuma sustain Niehaus's position in the party?

When I ask him what's behind his undying fealty to JZ, I get a brief monologue about Radical Economic Transformation, with the claim that the bonds of Struggle loyalty bind them together.

His loyalty to Zuma, Niehaus told me, stems from the kindness Zuma showed him while Niehaus was still being incarcerated in Pretoria Central.

"I was one of the last political prisoners who was released. Zuma made it his personal mission to get me out of prison. He came to visit me several times; he contacted my parents. I do feel a strong sense of loyalty to Msholuzi for the loyalty that he gave me."

Is that true? Who knows. Niehaus was a master of alternative facts before Donald Trump made them trendy, and sources say his loyalty to Zuma is out of financial dependency.

In a 2008 interview, before Niehaus's life was turned upside down, he said that all he really wanted out of life was "to be happy". I was interested to know how that particular mission was going.

Niehaus paused.

"I am quite happy," he said eventually.

"I like having grown old. I'm 61. I think age has brought some experience, some wisdom, some ability to deal with the flak life has thrown at me. I live a very simple life. I have an apartment in Rosebank which I love. I don't like driving, I am a horrible driver, so I use Uber mostly. I have a smallish but very comfortable apartment. Some of the things that in my younger age I thought to be very important in terms of material possessions, some of the things I was trying to strive towards, which led to financial problems, are not important. They don't add anything to my life. I'm feeling quite content." **DM**

Reference:

Davis, R. (2021). [SOLDIER OF MISFORTUNE - Carl Niehaus against the world](https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-02-12-carl-niehaus-against-the-world/) from *Daily Maverick* [online]. Available at <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-02-12-carl-niehaus-against-the-world/> . Accessed on 12 February 2021.