

Grassroots voices



NTWU, painted by Lou Almon, 1982, photograph courtesy Lou Almon

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, the rage that fuelled the uprisings of 1976, and the repression that followed, had thrown up new structures and organisations. People and communities recognised that even though apartheid denied them a vote for government, they could create their own 'grassroots' organisations to make their demands heard. People in communities throughout the country mobilised into a range of small, mass-based groups, which were barely legal. These organisations could not be formally linked to any banned organisations, however, and the most common tactic used by the state against them was charges of association with the banned ANC. Black trade unions flourished around all the issues of wages, working conditions, and apartheid restrictions on labour. Student, parent and teacher groups were organised in response to the chaotic state of Bantu Education. Community-based 'civics' mobilised around issues such as housing, rents, water, electricity and local government. These groups built links between themselves, and with the outlawed liberation movements.

All of these grassroots organisations demanded media – the 'public voice'. Printers and fine artists found themselves inundated with requests for graphics, posters, pamphlets, and banners. Community art structures defined and redefined their relationships to growing audiences, and to their own production of meaning and message. The debate over the dialectic between art and struggle appeared firmly on the agenda.

The workers speak

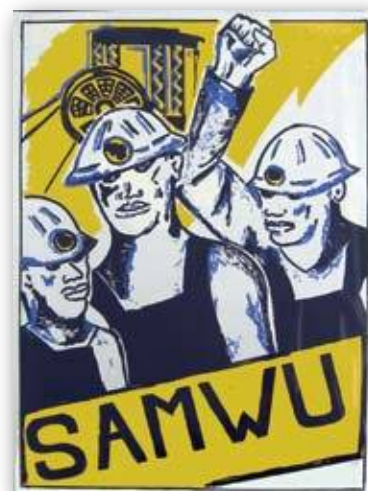
The growing political awareness among the youth and communities in general interacted with, and built upon, a growing militancy among black workers – particularly after the 1976 uprisings. In 1973, strikes erupted in Durban and the mines and factories of the Rand, spreading out to industrialised areas across the country. The trade unions linked to the political movements of the 1950s had been heavily suppressed by the apartheid state. By the 1970s, trade union activity among African workers was severely restricted. But by the end of this decade, emerging black unions pressed forward with demands to end apartheid's colour bar in jobs, and for representation and rights for all workers. Further, the apartheid government faced increasing calls from the manufacturing industry to meet rising needs for skilled labour. In 1979, government amended the Industrial Relations Act, giving some recognition to emergent black trade unions – notably, the legal right to organise some 70 000 black workers who were already joined into about 27 organisations.

For the first time since the 1950s, labour action by African workers could be openly promoted.

These emergent trade unions mobilised both workers and the communities that workers lived in to confront the conditions established by apartheid. Trade unionist and community leader, Thozamile Botha, put it like this:

'I firmly believe the problem of the worker does not end at the work place (and) it is the employer that creates the problem. For instance, if the worker is underpaid at work – that problem does not end at the work place. He is unable to pay his rent and as such he is evicted from his house ... his child loses school because he cannot afford to pay school fees and (for books) and (the) uniform. This is not only the problem of the worker now, it becomes the problem of the community.'

The emergent trade unions called upon black communities and progressive organisations for support. The demand for graphics from labour organisations linked up to the graphics and print efforts of cultural activists, and anti-apartheid students. Student groups and community organisations backed boycotts for the Fatti's and Moni's strike in 1979, for the Red Meat boycott organised from the Western Cape



SAMWU, artist unknown, Johannesburg, 1984, silkscreen. No. 1354



Union Bashers, Franco Frescura, for Dunlop Strike, Johannesburg, silkscreen, 1979. No. 107



Sampson Ndou addresses meeting in Johannesburg about Wilson-Rowntree boycott, early 1980s. Photo by Dilip Waghmarae

Rock for NUM,
NUM Support
Committee,
Lenasia,
silkscreen, circa
1982 No. 2255



in 1980, and for the Wilson Rowntree sweets boycott (that began in 1981).

This description tells of the community involvement in the Fatti's and Moni's strike:

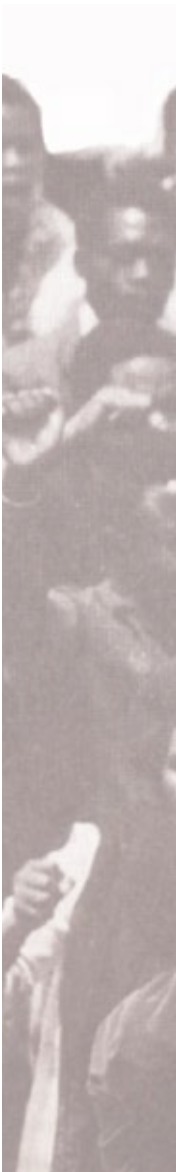
'A major feature of this particular strike was the way in which the community wholeheartedly supported the striking workers. The union called for a boycott of Fatti's and Moni's products and it was successfully launched on 11 May. Beginning with university and college students pledging their support (from the University of the Western Cape, Bellville Teachers' Training College, Bellville College of Advanced Technical Education, and Hewat Training College), the boycott caught on rapidly and soon snowballed throughout the region and then nationally. Within a few months it was supported by a wide range of organisations, including the 14 000 strong Union of Teachers' Association of South Africa, the South African Council of Sport (SACOS), the Labour Party, and the Western Cape Traders' Association which represents some 2,000 black traders in the area. Various trade unions, Inkatha and the Soweto Committee of Ten also joined in the boycott. Local bakeries, e.g. the Silverton Bakery, came out in support and suspended all purchases of flour from the Fatti's and Moni's factory. It has been widely acknowledged that this expression of solidarity from the community had a significant effect on management's eventual willingness to negotiate terms and put an end to the strike'.²

In Johannesburg in 1981, a community-based labour support structure called Rock Against Management (RAM) commissioned a number of artists – including William Kentridge – to design posters on a range of issues, including concerts in support of the mineworkers on strike, and to promote 'anti-Republic Day' celebrations.

In Cape Town, the emergent unions relied on artists working with CAP to design and print posters, graphics, and banners.

By the mid-1980s, there were over 30 new (mostly black) trade unions in South Africa. Some of these were organised into two federations: the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) and the Council of Unions of South Africa (CUSA). Ex-Wits University student, graphic artist and architect, Franco Frescura designed the FOSATU logo.

In 1985, the federations and many of the new independent unions joined to form a united federation: Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU).



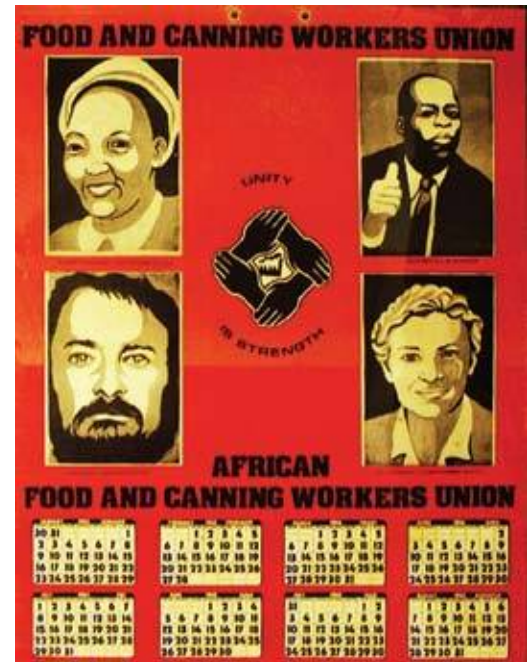
Remember Neil: lived for his country, died in detention

On 17 November 1981, security police detained a number of officials from the emergent union movement: Emma Mashinini of the Commercial and Catering Workers Union; Dr Neil Aggett, organiser for the Food and Canning Workers Union; Dr Liz Floyd; Sami Kikine; Thomazile Gqweta and Sisa Njikelane of South African Allied Workers Union (SAAWU); Alan Fine of the Hotel and Liquor Workers Union; and Aurret van Heerden and Barbara Hogan, both student activists. Eventually only Barbara Hogan was charged, and sentenced to ten years for treason: her 'crime' had been to connect emergent unions with the ANC.

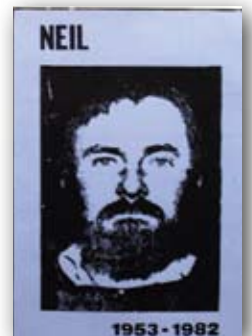
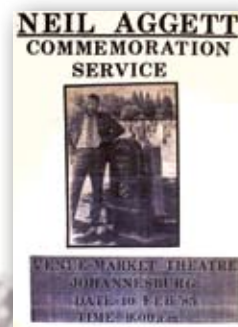
Neil Aggett died in John Vorster Square police station on 5 February 1982, 70 days after his detention — the 51st person to die in security police detention since 1963. Police claimed he was found hanging.

Twenty thousand people attended Neil Aggett's funeral. The trade union movement called a half-hour work stoppage nationwide; 100 000 workers answered this call — the first national work stoppage in South Africa over a political issue since the 1950s.

Poster-makers placed Neil Aggett's image on placards; his portrait became another icon of the struggle.



Detail, Fawu Calendar, artist unknown, 1984. No. 136



Neil Aggett Commemoration Service, artist unknown, 1985. No. 1183

Neil, printed for funeral of Neil Aggett, 1982. No. 545

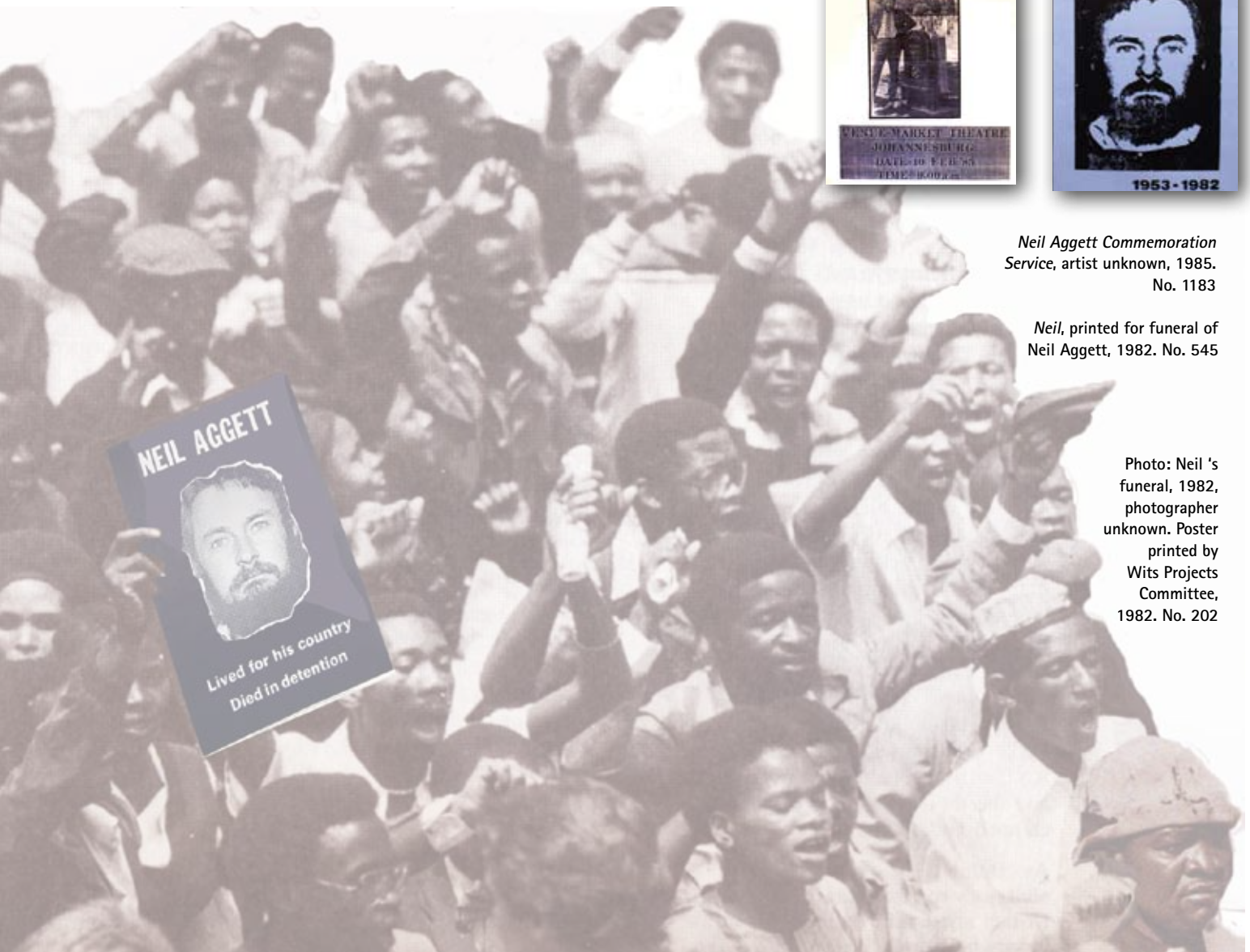


Photo: Neil 's funeral, 1982, photographer unknown. Poster printed by Wits Projects Committee, 1982. No. 202



*Orange Vaal
Workers Union, Lou
Almon, pastel on
paper, 1980, photos
courtesy Lou Almon.*



Lou Almon: Drawing the Workers Movement, early 1980s

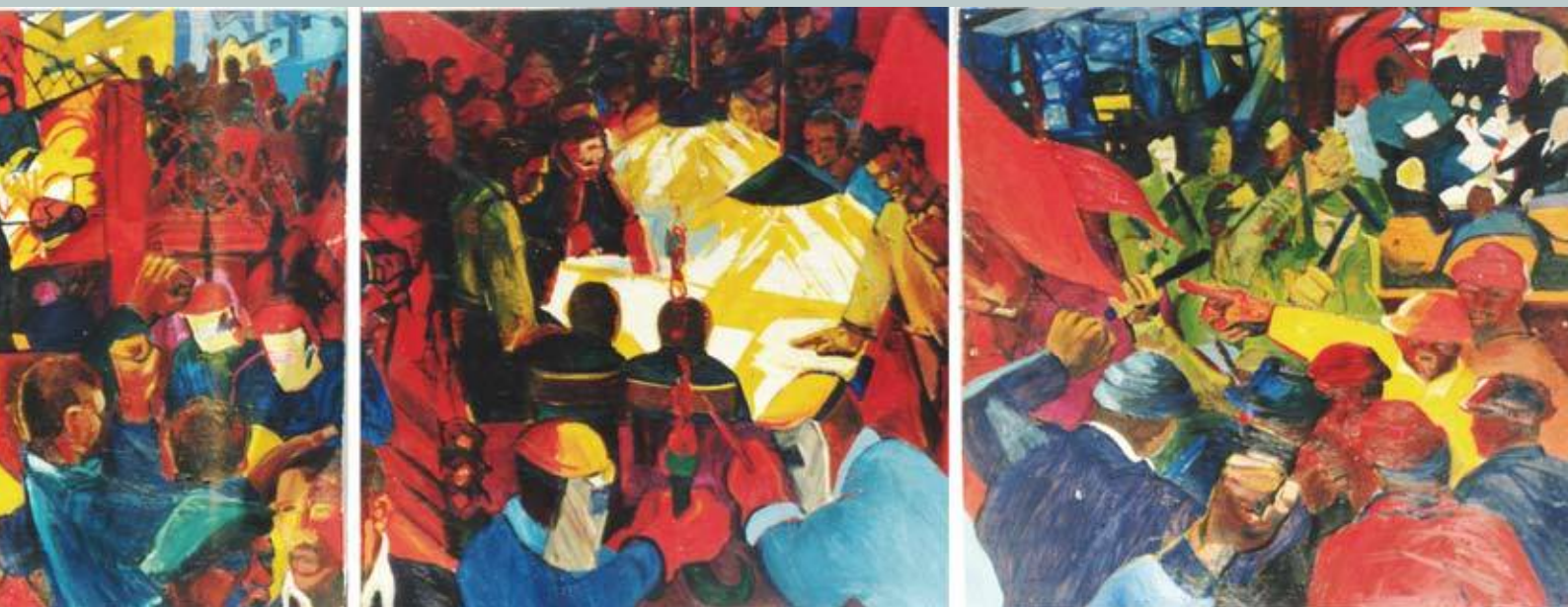
Lou Almon was born in Port St Johns in the Eastern Cape, and went to art school at Grahamstown, and then to UCT in the late 1970s. In 1981, she returned to the Eastern Cape. There, she worked in the townships, at a pre-school and at an old age home in Mdantsane. Her husband Gavin worked with the emergent trade unions, particularly SAAWU, and set up a SACHED advice office in East London. Gavin describes working for the unions in East London:

'The Youth Congresses were just starting to be established. People who had been kicked out of the schools after the boycotts of 76, blacklisted, kids on the streets — I did a survey of this and asked SACHED to set up a centre. I worked with Joe Mati, he had been on the Island, was just released. We were involved in setting up the advice office, organising ANC youth and trade union stuff. FOSATU had a small presence there through NUMSA, at Daimler Chrysler; then SAAWU took over, followed by a wave of strikes, the strike at Raylite Batteries

'There was a total lack of resources. The only photocopy machine was in the public library. When SACHED started it became a resource centre (for all of these community groups). We had one of those old roneo machines. It was the time of the Wilson and Rowntrees strike, the Red Meat Boycott in Cape Town, Fatti's and Moni's, with SAAWU, Sisa Njikilana and Thozamile Botha SAAWU ran the whole of East London when we got there in 1981. There was SAAWU and the Black Sash office. That was it.'

Lou, as a trained artist, was reflecting what she was seeing and experiencing, putting together the images that grew around the growing trade union movement. She was familiar with Diego Riviera and the Mexican muralists (although not, at that time, with the Mozambican mural movement). These were a clear inspiration. In 1980, she did a pastel drawing for the Orange Vaal Workers Union, and an appliquéd banner for them. The drawing was hung in their offices in Van der Byl Park. 'We did a lot of banners then', she recalls.

In 1982, Lou Almon drew a picture for the National Union of Textile Workers (NUTW, later to be merged into the South African Clothing and Textile Workers Union, SACTWU). The picture shows the Frame Workers strike, and the people who were



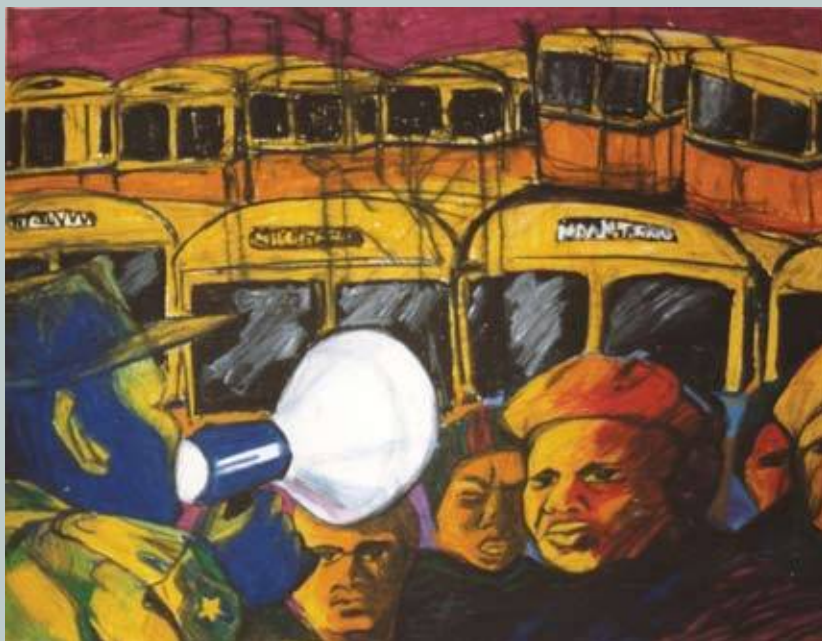
killed there (portraits done from pictures in the newspaper). It includes their general secretary, Johnny Coplyn, the FOSATU regional officer, Illas Banda; and depicts union members involved in the Brown Lung Campaign run by NUTW.

MAWU East Rand struggles,
Lou Almon, 1982

Another picture of Lou's — also from 1982 — shows the MAWU struggles in the East Rand: the fight against shack removals in Katlehong (1st panel); the centre panel with the NAAWU-MAWU unity talks, which became NUMSA; the centre panel shows the East Rand Shop Stewards Council; while the third panel shows SEIFSA, the employers' organisation, the bosses in the corner looking frightened, with their police in front of them.

Her Mdantsane bus boycott picture shows people during the massive bus boycotts of 1983. She described how she came to draw this picture:

'I was working in Mdantsane at the old age home. Because of the consumer boycott, I had to go to Bisho (in Ciskei) to buy goods for the home. These were people I saw on the road.'³



Mdantsane Bus Boycott,
Lou Almon, 1983



1980: The Year the Students said 'No More', artist unknown, 1980. No. 218

The movement for education

'I am a drop-out twice over, from Durban Westville and from Wits', comments Jayesh Bhana. His involvement with poster-making started with the university. In 1980, at the time of the Durban Westville boycotts-

'... when students at my residence went on boycott, I took pastels with me, and kept them in the residence. When the boycott started, I used my pastels to make posters ... when I came back to Laudium (Jayesh's home-town) I became part of the group of activists there.' (Jayesh Bhana) ⁴

From the 1976 uprising, the fight against Bantu Education acted as a rallying point for community organisations and mobilisation. The state banned students' organisations, and detained and tried student leaders in 1977, but within two years the student movement had regrouped, and restructured.

Congress of South African Students (COSAS)

COSAS was launched in 1979:

'COSAS branches soon sprang up in most major urban centres, including Soweto, Pretoria, and Port Elizabeth ... Within a year there were nation-wide swoops and the detention of the entire NEC and a number of members. The first national president, Ephraim Mogale, was charged and sentenced to eight years on Robben Island for furthering the aims of the African National Congress (ANC) and the South African Communist Party (SACP).

'The schools were COSAS' main focus, and its stated aim was to strive for "free, compulsory, dynamic education in a non-racial and democratic SA". COSAS also aimed to improve relations between students and the community, holding that students were part of the oppressed and exploited communities, and that the education struggle could not be isolated from the broader struggle against apartheid." (SASPU National 1985) ⁵

In 1980, school boycotts began in the Western Cape, spreading rapidly across the country. Students protested against poor facilities, the lack of textbooks, badly trained teachers, corporal punishment, and the lack of student representative councils (SRCs). These boycotts paralleled growing labour action, bus boycotts, rent protests, and the rejection of community councillors.

'Student-worker-parent-teacher alliances were strengthened. In the Western Cape, this was through the Red Meat consumer boycott in solidarity with striking meat workers, parents' committees in various communities, the bus boycott, and the Free Mandela Campaign.

'These campaigns ensured community support for students and allowed them to link up with broader issues. In some cases, parents' organisations formed the basis for new civics.' (SASPU National) ⁶

Hundreds of COSAS students were arrested, detained, and tried. Police attacked protesting students in the Cape and the Free State; some students were shot dead. By early October 1980, the Department of Education and Training had closed 80 schools indefinitely.

COSAS developed close working alliances with other student organisations, notably, the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) which organised in the white campuses, and then the Azanian Students Organisation (AZASO) which organised at the black tertiary institutions. The first joint campaign was to protest against the 20th anniversary of the South African Republic, under the slogan, 'Forward to a People's Republic'.



COSAS Cultural Launch, artist unknown, Wentworth, circa 1980. No. 407

National Union of South African Students (NUSAS)

NUSAS had long-established roots in largely white English-medium universities. As an organisation, NUSAS functioned legally throughout the 1970s, although several of its leaders went into exile — either to avoid arrest or to evade conscription. Some joined the ANC. By the mid-1970s, NUSAS committed its relatively large resources — including the skills of trained art students and access to student publications and university presses — to mobilise support for the anti-apartheid struggle. Through the 1980s, NUSAS printed posters and produced media in support of detainees and political prisoners, in support of emerging trade unions, in support of civic organisations, and against Bantu Education. And, with its base at the white 'liberal' universities, NUSAS also played a leading role in organising against military conscription for white youths.



Reject Republic Day Celebrations, NUSAS, Cape Town, 1981. No. 1572

Janet Cherry at NUSAS

Janet Cherry was at the University of Cape Town (UCT) from 1980. In 1982, she became general secretary of NUSAS, and in 1984 she moved to Port Elizabeth.

At UCT, Janet worked with the NUSAS MediaCom (Media Committee) between 1981 and 1982, working with both litho printing presses and silk screens at the university. MediaCom made pamphlets and posters, while ProjectsCom (Projects Committee) ran specific campaigns, for instance, the anti-Republic Day campaign.

UCT provided a printing room with two offset litho presses. These could print A4 sized pamphlets, and A3 posters in black and white, but for larger prints and colour they used silk screens. Steve Gordon organised most of the printing on the litho presses and the silk screening. He produced photo-stencils for the silk screen in the darkroom, and organised student sessions to make silk screens with cut stencils, and wax crayon drawings. A lot of students would come in to print the silk screens. UCT employed two printers, who saw themselves as technicians, rather than involved in conception. Janet recalls they had a tendency to get irate over students operating the presses (presumably not to their professional standards).

Other student activists worked with media, including Max Ozinsky and the lecturer in sociology Jenny Schreiner, who was involved in produc. Janet recalls that the media committee usually designed the posters themselves, on the basis of their own drawings and ideas. They made posters in support of the Red Meat Strike, and against the Liaison Committees, which were being promoted by government to by-pass trade union organisations for blacks.

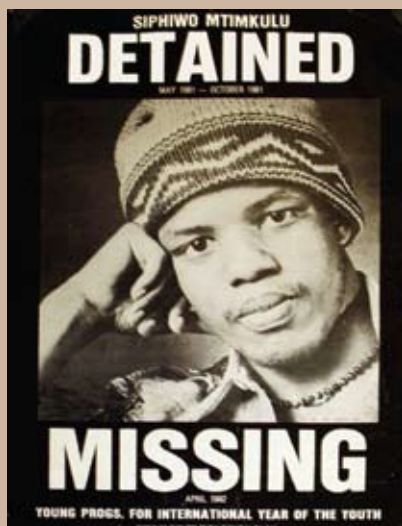
In 1980, UCT's NUSAS media committee printed and distributed thousands of copies of the Freedom Charter. The police arrested a group of committee members, and charged them with reproducing banned literature. In the end, however, the students were acquitted; the magistrate ruled that they had taken the words from a very old printed version of the charter, too old to have been banned — the banning covered only a specific printed edition, not the same words as an earlier edition.

The group used photographs, such as those in the poster about Sphiwe Mthimkulu, and another, early poster protesting Oscar Mpetha's trial. Later, when Barbara Hogan was detained in 1981, the group printed a manual about the detention of women. The police appeared again, and threatened them. They said, 'We didn't get you for Oscar Mpetha, but we will get you now.'

Janet Cherry moved to Port Elizabeth in 1984, where — amongst other activities — she organised a silk screen workshop for COSAS and youth congresses.⁷



Vote for Unions not Committees, artist unknown, circa 1981. No. 225

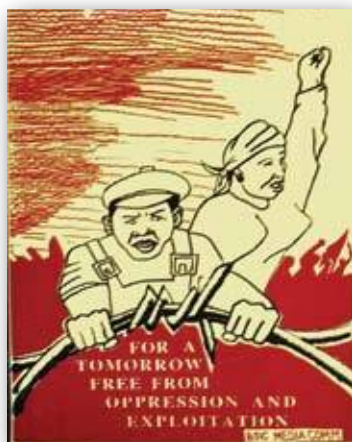


Siphiso Mtimkulu Detained, Missing,
artist unknown, PFP, Cape Town, 1982.
No. 1504

Siphiso Mtimkulu

In 1982, Cosas leader Siphiso Mtimkulu disappeared shortly after he brought a case against the Minister of Law and Order, for poisoning him with thallium while in police detention. Janet Cherry, who was then working with the Media Committee (MediaCom) of NUSAS at UCT, printed a poster with the slogan 'Detained, Poisoned, Missing!' (The 'Missing' was in reference to the movie, *Missing*, about repression in Chile, which had just gone on circuit.) The photographer who took the photo said it could be used on condition that the poster did not credit the picture to him. COSAS distributed the poster, but the police banned it immediately. Security police raided the NUSAS offices, confiscated copies, and destroyed the plates for the poster. However, other groups reproduced the poster, leaving out the words 'poisoned' to avoid falling under the ban on the first version.⁸

Years later, in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearings, it was confirmed that Siphiso Mtimkulu had been murdered by the security police. The poster opposite reappears in the film made about the security policeman who murdered him, Gideon Nieuwoudt, recording Nieuwoudt's application for legal amnesty and perhaps forgiveness from Mtimkulu's family. Famously, he did not receive forgiveness, but rather was hit over the head with a large vase by Mtimkulu's son, who had grown up without a father.



For a Tomorrow; BSIC Media Committee, Wits, 1982. Based on poster from Philippines. No.776

Azanian Students Organisation (AZASO)

In 1981, students in black tertiary institutions formed the Azanian Students Organisation (AZASO). Initially, AZASO was seen as linked to the black consciousness group, the Azanian People's Organisation, but over the next few years it moved towards alignment with the 'charterist' (pro-ANC) movement, working with NUSAS and COSAS on the anti-Republic Day and anti-tricameral parliament, and with other organisations under the charterist banner.

Razia Saleh: Activism at Wits

Razia studied at Wits University from 1981 to 1984. At Wits, she joined the Black Students Society (BSS), and in late 1981 she was instrumental in forming the BSS Women's Group. She worked on print media for a number of community and student groups – particularly with AZASO, the BSS and the Student Representative Council (SRC). With the revival of the Transvaal Indian Congress (TIC) in 1983, she helped make TIC posters using Wits SRC media resources.

Razia was one of the Wits students who helped print posters for the Wilson Rowntree boycott in 1981. She helped to design and lay out progressive media – pamphlets and leaflets – through MARS (the Media Resources Services) at Wits. Razia and the people she worked with later printed posters at Silk screen Training Project (STP) when it first set up at End Street in Doornfontein.

'At Wits, students used roneos, letaset, then burned stencils to make the roneo – this (the technology change) also made a difference.'

Razia describes the process of finding, and incorporating, the images of South Africa's struggle history:

'We would go to Wits historical papers, we would get historical pictures, from periodicals, old papers, newspapers; from *New Age* and *The Star*. We would lift the images, we would photocopy, cut and paste them.'⁹

(Today, Razia is the archivist for the ANC. At the time of writing, she is involved in



Detentions won't stop us, BSS Women's Group, Wits, 1982. No. 2433

researching the records of the 1956 Treason Trial.)

Street committees, block organisation and community civics

The first 'civic', the Soweto Civic Association, was formed in 1979 to look at issues around living in the township, and to empower people's participation in community decision-making processes and governance. The second civic, the Port Elizabeth Black Civic Organisation (PEBCO) was launched a month later, followed by civics in most urban areas classified as 'non-white'.

Civics focused on opposition to the community councils (local government structures for black urban areas established as part of the white-run state administration), the 'homelands' system (areas set aside as reserves for blacks who were not allowed to move to urban areas), and the interlinked issues around living conditions – housing and rent, water and municipal services, commuter bus and train transport.

PEBCO led the way in implementing the formation of 'street committees', called the 'M-plan' – the M standing for Mandela, who devised the concept during the 1950s mass mobilisation by the ANC Youth League. Each committee would organise the people on its own street, ensuring people were informed and involved in the local struggles – struggles which inevitably reflected the national political climate.

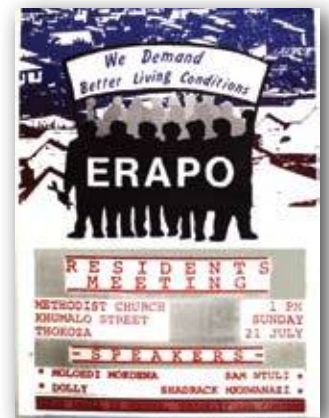
People who had skills in the visual media found their feet within these street committee structures. Razia Saleh describes her involvement at the local community level:

'We were part of the planning meetings. A national day of protest, or around municipal elections or around the tri-cameral parliament: we would be part of the planning; we would do the poster to announce the meeting ... It was a natural extension of being active. It wasn't just posters, it was part of making pamphlets, posters, leaflets.'¹⁰

Local street and block committee structures engaged activists in making pamphlets, in block-by-block leafleting, and in putting up posters on the streets.



SCA, artist unknown, stencilled, Soweto Civic Association, circa 1982. No. 371



Residents Meeting, East Rand People's Organisation, silkscreen, STP, circa 1983. No. 63

Profile of a community poster activist: Jayesh Bhana

'We worked with BSS at Wits, using their facilities. We designed the posters; they would take it to Wits and they would make the stencil, upstairs at Wits. Once or twice we did screen the posters in Laudium.

'Once the posters came back (from Wits), we would go to an activist's garage. We would get cardboard backs and make holes, add strings, use flour- and wall-paper paste to put the posters on the backing, tie the strings, stash them in cars. Two or three people would go in a car to tie the posters on poles. We would go to set areas; three people ran out of the car, one holds it, one ties, then drive to the next pole.

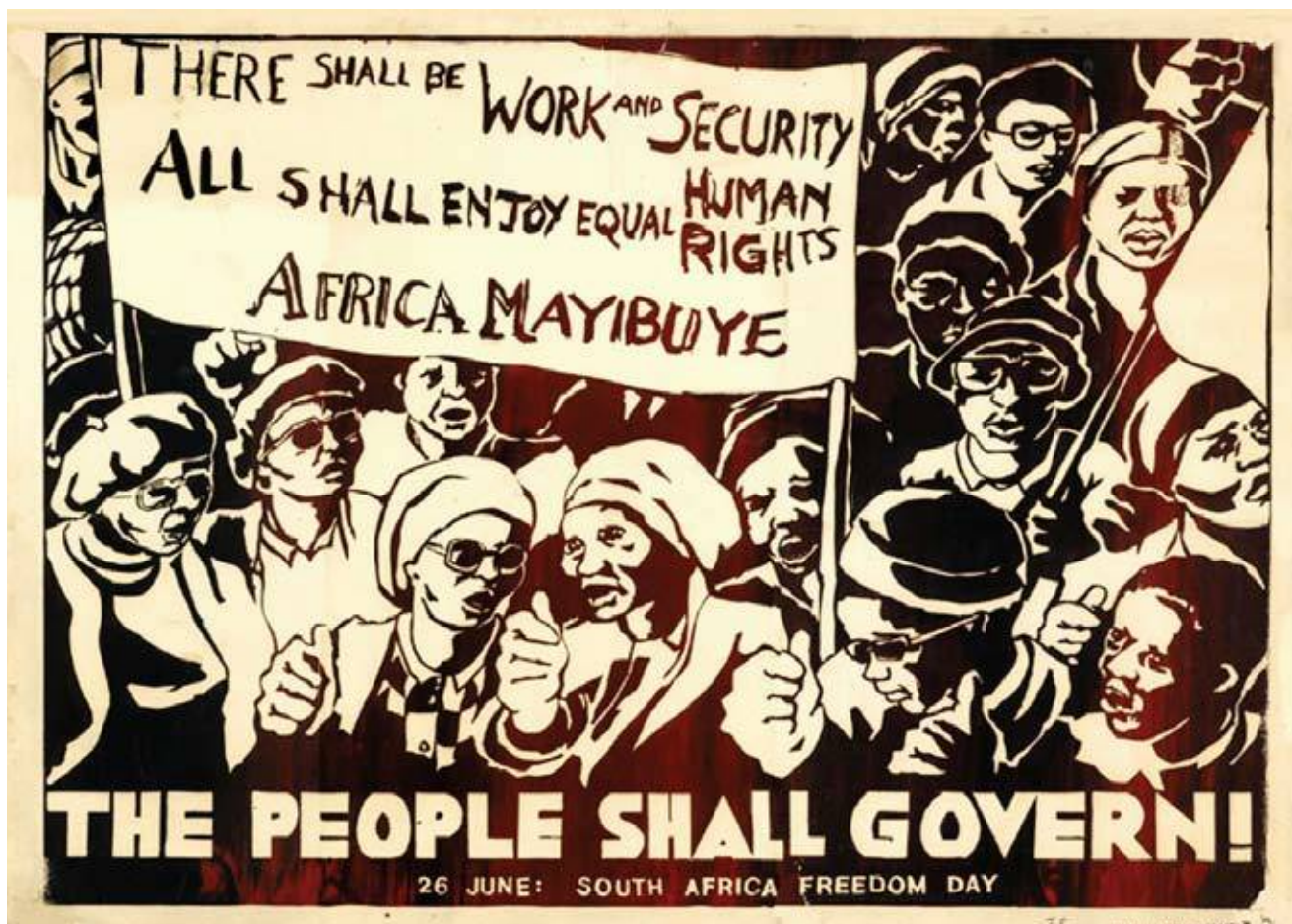
'The process of hanging was the same with mass-produced posters from the UDF.

We were followed when we were putting up posters. Once another group – not the car I was in – was stopped by the police and questioned.'

The average age of poster activists was 22. In retrospect, the adrenaline rush 'was fun'.¹¹



No Botha, artist Jayesh Bhana, silkscreened for TIC at STP, 1983. No. 147



The People Shall Govern, artist J Seidman, Medu, silkscreen, Gaborone, 1982, based on photograph by Eli Weinberg at Kliptown. No. 3578

Forward to the Freedom Charter

Increasingly these numerous grassroots organisations promoted the principles of the Freedom Charter, adopted by the ANC and its alliance allies at the Kliptown Congress of the People in 1956. 'The people shall govern!' 'There shall be houses, security and comfort!' 'All shall be equal before the law!' 'The doors of learning and culture shall be opened!' Community organisations used these demands as slogans on posters and flyers, and discussed the implications of these slogans for people living on their streets.

... Distancing black consciousness

At the same time, the campaign to promote the Freedom Charter linked people and organisations to a shift away from the racial divisions previously entrenched in the black consciousness ideology. Increasingly political activists took the position that apartheid defined and oppressed communities on the basis of colour and race. In contrast to this, for the resistance movement, colour and race should not determine the status of individuals or the extent to which they would be allowed to participate in campaigns. For progressive media workers, the central task remained to ensure that those who were voiceless, oppressed, and systematically silenced were heard – a project that was fundamental to earlier black consciousness ideology. But with the growing influence of the non-racial Charterist tradition, there was increasing support for the ideal of eliminating the racial divisions entrenched under apartheid, rather than merely replacing one ethnic group of beneficiaries with another.

As new mass-based organisations emerged, this debate at times became fierce,

resulting in splits within organisations over the way forward.

At national level, the Freedom Charter was printed and reprinted. The anniversary of the Kliptown Congress — June 26 — was commemorated. Increasingly these slogans were incorporated into one clear national demand: one person, one vote, in a unified, democratic and non-racial South Africa.

Within Medu Art Ensemble in Botswana, the founders of the organisation, who came from a black consciousness background, became divided between supporters of a strict black consciousness position and the non-racialism of the ANC's charterist tradition. In particular, there was division over whether white people who were committed to the struggle could belong to Medu. Some members left the organisation, and by 1979, Medu included anyone actively engaged in the anti-apartheid struggle.

Similar debates over black consciousness occurred throughout emerging community groups inside South Africa, including those concerned with media, communications, and the arts. 'In the Western Cape, people were more open about switching to Charterist positions', commented one activist. At CAP, some activists felt that the organisation veered towards promoting black advancement rather than non-racial democracy — a trend also linked to accessing funding from the Urban Foundation (using US-AID money). At one point, the Unity Movement — described as 'the political expression of the anti-charterist position' — attempted to take over CAP. Although these issues were seen as primarily political, they were not particularly reflected in artistic debates.

'It was not a cut and dried position within CAP, but it was the order of the day', commented a person who considered himself as a political activist, rather than an artist. He argued that his role was not to ensure that artists in CAP should 'toe the line' but rather to encourage them away from reactionary or counter-revolutionary



There shall be houses, security and comfort for all, artist Mario Pissarra, issued by Gardens Youth Congress, 1989



There shall be Peace and Friendship, STP workshop, Johannesburg, 1985, silkscreened. No. 973

Grassroots Calendar, 1982, produced by Grassroots Newspaper, litho, Cape Town, 1982. No. 2126



expression: 'not to toe the line, but to give people space to work'.¹²

The 'community press'

The community newspaper *Grassroots* was formed during the regrouping of community organisations after the 1977 repression. Key figures in the newspaper came out of the Black Consciousness movement, mostly from a SASO and BPC background — including Jonny Issel, Steven Carolus (brother of Cheryl), and Leila Patel. But from the beginning, *Grassroots* itself was defined as 'charterist':

'*Grassroots* was seen as part of the new wave of resistance, formed under the charter banner; part of the ANC's call for mass mobilisation under the four pillars of struggle. The freedom charter was deliberately promoted, popularising the charter and deepening mass mobilisation.

'*Grassroots* would take up day-to-day problems of people and mobilise around them, link them to the Charter — for instance, "there shall be housing, security and comfort".

'[Over time] *Grassroots* moved into other communities, assisted other Western Cape organisations with publications, and answered calls from community publications elsewhere, with printing newsletters, magazines, flyers — and posters. *Grassroots* meant to go into poster production, staff assisted community groups in producing posters.'¹³

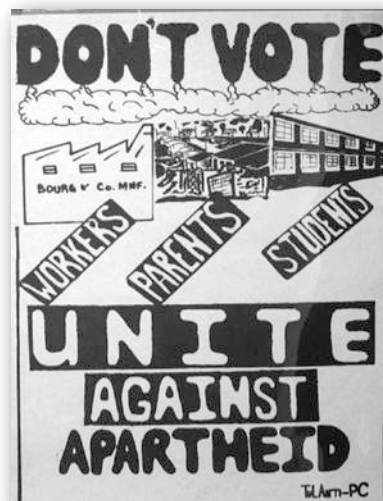
By the early 1980s, a network of community newspapers sprang up around the country, reporting the local resistance news that never made it into the commercial press. Besides the *Grassroots* newspaper in Cape Town, there were *The Eye* in Pretoria, *Ukasa* in Durban, *Speak* in Johannesburg, and the student newspaper *SASPU National*. The activists who produced these newspapers worked closely with community arts groups, sharing resources and facilities as well as personnel. This



Anti P-C says, artist Dilip Waghmarae with TIC collective, Johannesburg, 1984. No. 1056

Sies, artist unknown, Johannesburg, 1984. No. 868

Don't Vote, artist unknown, Johannesburg, 1984. No. 1862



We gave life to organising resistance in Westbury (Jessie Duarte was involved here); we worked with a small group in Eldorado Park; also worked from the core group into the Northern Cape, and Pretoria coloured areas.

'The political movements in our areas had no money – it came out of our own pockets. Our Saturdays were cake sales and jumble sales, selling old clothing.

'Our communities were also very active against sports apartheid – Bill Jardine was a main organiser. We demanded: "No normal sports in an abnormal society".

'Mostly, we made the posters by hand in our communities, silk screened. We printed some ourselves, some at Wits, some at a place that was run downtown.

'But those posters, that visual expression of our activities, became critical. It said that there are people in our communities who reject the system. Important to say: here is a resistance against what the government was trying to get us to do...' ¹⁴

Graphic Equaliser

The company called the Graphic Equaliser also grew out of the crying need for publicity for progressive organisations and publications. By end of the 1970s, many community groups relied upon Ravan Press and *Staffrider* for printing, but Ravan had no funds or resources for pre-press work, or for the mass production community groups needed.

At Ravan, recalls Kevin Humphrey,

'Everything was *ad hoc* – people would ask us how to do things, we would finish it. At this time, printers or publishers would propose covers, they could be anything useless, but people had to use them.' ¹⁵

To fill this gap, in 1981, Kevin started Graphic Equaliser with Andy Mason, who was working as a graphic designer at Ravan Press. Mike Kirkwood at Ravan Press assisted the formation of Graphic Equaliser by paying the first month's salary for Graphic Equaliser staff. They were joined (in 1982-83) by Mzwakhe Nthabatsi and Caroline Cullinan. Reedwaan Vally joined in 1983.

All Graphic Equaliser staff had been formally trained in the arts or print production: Reedwaan Vally and Kevin Humphrey trained in graphic design and photo litho techniques; Mzwakhe Nthabatsi trained at Rorke's Drift, and had worked as a printer. Caroline Cullinan trained in fine arts; and Andy Mason had a background in fine arts

and cartooning (he later produced the comic book *Vusi Comes Home* for EDA).

Mzwake Nhlabatsi

Mzwake Nhlabatsi was born on 20 April 1954, in Soweto. Mzwake says he was interested in art from childhood – 'I just liked drawing, if I could lay my hands on pencils and paper'. As a child, he went to classes at Jubilee Art Centre in Faraday Street after school on Wednesdays. In 1976–77, he studied at Rorke's Drift in Natal: 'a good place but lacking ... my feel was more for graphics, pre-print, not fine arts'. In the 1970s, Mzwake often found himself talking with artists like Thami Mnyele, Fikile, and Matsamela:

'I liked what they did but you came to art with your own mood – my focus was on illustration ... Black people cannot afford art, the only way to reach them is through graphics, publications. With skills that you learn in graphics, you can go back to art and make things that people can afford. I could reach a larger audience – speak to the community audience.'¹⁶

In 1978, Mzwake began illustrating and laying out books at SACHED Trust, where he worked for over ten years. But he is very clear that in terms of graphics, 'SACHED was just a job ... whatever we were doing was for the people'. He also taught art in Dube within the community art structures.

Mzwake drew comic books of Esk'ia Mphahlele's novel *Down Second Avenue*, and a comic called *Taxi driver*. He aimed to use the comic book format to consciously build African culture, making Mphahlele's writing available to children and less literate people.

Kevin Humphrey described their approach to images and art:

'There were no grey areas for us; we were people with technical as well as artistic skills. We were a bunch of people with left-wing politics – we knew where our sentiments lay, we were sure where we were.

'In terms of imagery: they (the community organisations) would come in with their images and ideas. People would come in, with confused ideas, too complicated, too much detail. One symbol on top of another, a bit like Russian Constructivist style; that was OK. But we had to clean them up, you know, make the lines flow, balance, make it work graphically.

'I would take their visually illiterate stuff and put it together, making the poster work. But it was a bit missing in those days – sometimes we just printed it – at the time that seemed right. We spent a lot of time re-doing logos – most of them got another clean-up after 1990.'¹⁷

Reedwaan Vally commented:

'Most organisations gave us an initial brief; but they were so busy they would leave it in our hands. They didn't really know what they needed (in terms of visual imagery, symbolism, design). We would produce a draft, and they would change it and we would remake it.

'There was a lot of background (to design) that came from my schooling. I spent a week or two learning about propaganda – it wasn't necessarily a bad thing: "One man's propaganda is another man's hate mail". The Soviet stuff was powerful, strong, rich in what it was saying to its people. But we realised that the imagery we needed was different from the Soviet images; we needed African design.'¹⁸

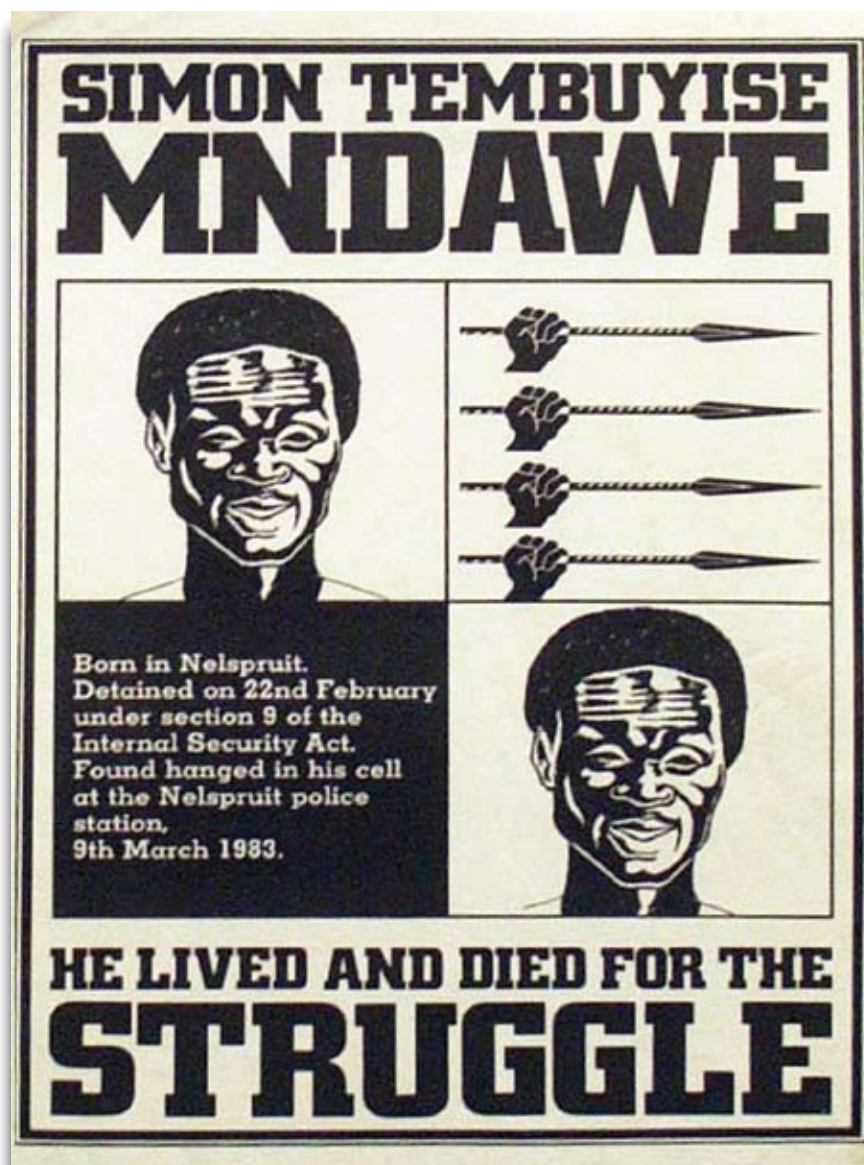


Portrait of Thami Mnyele by Mzwake Nhlabatsi, printed in Staffrider, 1985



Portrait of Pascal Gwala, by Mzwake Nhlabatsi, printed in Staffrider, 1985

Simon Tembuyise Mndawe, Mzwake Nthlabatsi and Kevin Humphrey, litho, Johannesburg, 1983. No. 2565



Reedwaan talks about trying to find more 'African' typefaces, but comments 'in the old days all the type was limited to Eurocentric type styles'. He never found one that he was happy with for political resistance graphics. Kevin Humphrey recalled that 'nobody knew much about typography. We used heroic fonts. Posters were all Letraset and paste up.'

Graphic Equaliser staff made effective use of struggle photography in their design, relying heavily on Afrapix. Kevin Humphrey noted that Paul Weinberg 'was into iconography — using a photo to stand for a whole story in people's minds. He would argue that people should 'use the whole picture', but he never complained if it was redrawn.'

The Graphic Equaliser staff were also aware of, and admired, the printmaking styles of people like Dumile Feni, Percy Sedumedi. 'We adored Gerard Sekoto — his early stuff, at least', Kevin Humphrey recalls. Mzwakhe Nthlabatsi travelled to France to interview Sekoto for *Staffrider* — on a ticket paid to cover a fashion event. (This was years before Sekoto was recognised as a figure within South African art history.) Throughout the 1980s — including through the states of emergency — Graphic Equaliser concentrated on professional production for commercial print processes. It primarily served struggle organisations — churches, NGOs, trade unions, community organisations. Reedwaan commented:

'While doing work for organisations, we would teach skills — at some point down the line the people we worked with would produce these things themselves. We worked with the original pre-COSATU unions (in FOSATU) — but most of those we taught did not have the machines to use it on.

'STP and CAP produced "high impact" materials, posters, banners, t-shirts, caps. They produced them under pressure, and they would not last long on the streets. We could, for example, produce publications with strong finish and binding. We were able to prepare work that was sophisticated, made to last. The books would not fall apart.'¹⁹

At the same time Graphic Equaliser maintained an image of working 'without politics, without political directives', and managed to spend nearly ten years without drawing the unwanted attention of the police. Kevin Humphrey said:

'Mzwakhe and I did a whole lot of work for Standard Bank — every now and then you had to get promotional work, for money. And it kept us looking OK with the cops.'

Commercial printers working with community structures

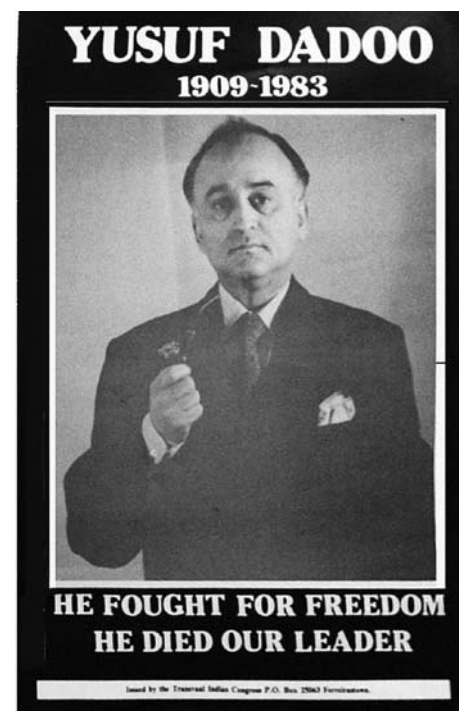
Given the heavy levels of state repression against mass-produced print, and the fact that most of the commercial printing presses were owned by white companies, it was perhaps inevitable that community groups, and subsequently national mass-based organisations, developed a complex relationship with the commercial press. Most of the larger, white-owned presses were not willing to risk involvement with this media. And historically, from the development of the printing press industry, the colour bar banned African workers from skilled print jobs (although coloured and Indian workers were regularly employed on the presses). In Cape Town, from the 1940s, coloured and Indian workers employed as printers had been organised by the Non-European Unity Movement. Cape community groups relied mostly on Ali & Sons, Esq., printers seen as sympathetic to charterist positions.

Dilip Waghmarae recalls that from 1978 onwards there were three printers who were willing to work with us — Shahid at Taj, and Niram at Shereno Printers (both in Benoni), also Globe in Fordsburg'. At that time, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Shereno was a small printing press in the back of a house in Wattville, and when work became too much for that press, they could take it to Taj, who had a larger press.

Globe Printers was headed by Dougie Pavadai — another person who regularly risked his print shop to produce political posters.²⁰

Every person involved in designing community and mass movement posters in this period has commented with respect and affection on the dedication of these commercial printers, many of whom risked companies and jobs they had spent their lives building, to do this work. Not surprisingly, people with commercial print backgrounds would explain their involvement with these political artworks to the police as a simple money transaction. Dilip stated:

'For the printing, I would put it together, but I would not keep it around after it was printed. We had a BSM (Benoni Student Movement) brochure published, it was banned by the next day. When we printed the tribute to Yusuf Dadoo (in 1983), by the next morning they — the security police — were at my house. I told the security police I was a printer; I would print for the National Party if they paid me.'²¹



Yusuf Dadoo, designed Dilip Waghmarae for the Transvaal Indian Congress, Johannesburg, litho print, 1983. No. 1089



Manfred Zylla's story

Manfred Zylla was born in Germany, in the same town as Bertold Brecht. He trained to be a printmaker in Germany. In the 1960s he made woodcuts around issues such as the Vietnam War and pollution. Zylla came to Cape Town in 1970, finding work as a printer for a large Swiss company in Cape Town, but he left after three months. He married a Muslim woman and moved to Athlone in 1974, where he lived until 1976.

During the 1976 uprising in Cape Town – a long and very violent period that began a few weeks after the Soweto uprising – Zylla made several protest posters (see page 58).

In 1980, Zylla returned to Observatory, where he bought a house. Between 1981 and 1985 he taught print making, mainly etchings, at CAP. 'I did not influence their styles', he maintains, but admits that David Hlongwane later said he was mostly influenced by Kathy Kollwitz and Manfred Zylla.

Zylla was also teaching at Michaelis, from 1981 to 1984. He commented that a number of politically-aware students left the university.

In 1982, Zylla was also 'doing [his] own work at CAP'. His work turned into an interaction, based on huge drawings that constituted a year's work – distorted, violent pictures of security police and government officials. 'I had to do something with these images, they were so horrible. I thought it was necessary to change the



images.' He hung the pictures in a room, organised a reggae band and asked people to start drawing over them. Art students from Michaelis helped the 'audience' to mix colours. 'People started working, waited for comments, then made changes. Some comments were not political, some were strong. Some art students, like Lionel (Davis), made strong comments. But there was a very negative reaction to the interaction, especially from the art school and students.'

Collective drawings done at interaction at CAP, in July 1982 (from publication by Zylla, Manfred, *Interaction: a public event*, Cape Town, 1982)

The outcomes of this interaction were collated into a book, in a limited edition of 560 copies — and the police banned it immediately for possession. The police explained (in writing) that they didn't like the pictures of the security police, as they brought the police into disrepute. Mark Kaplan, a documentary film maker who filmed the interaction, was deported after the exhibition.

Zylla was involved in organising the artwork sent to the Culture and Resistance Festival from CAP. The CAP theatre group and Amampondo were formed in a response to the call from the Festival. Zylla collected artwork for exhibition, hundreds of meetings. Artists at CAP included Hamilton Budassa, David Hlangwane, Cameron Vuyiya. After Culture and Resistance, people started to work more closely together, more actively.

Manfred Zylla designed a poster for the UDF launch, composed of two clasped hands, but it was not used, as a logo was brought down from Johannesburg instead. Then came the state of emergency, and the 1985 'Trojan Horse' shootings. Manfred Zylla's own children were playing not far away when a child was shot. Soon after, he and his family left for Germany.²²

Early 1980s: state of the arts

Thus, a graphic presence was beginning to develop that spoke for and with a 'community voice', reflecting the growing mobilisation of grassroots community groups around community protests.

For many of the early 1970s generation, Black Consciousness ideology increasingly merged with, and accepted, the long-standing ANC 'charterist' principles rooted in the broader population. In particular, this brought into the broader artistic movement key black consciousness concepts for culture: 'Speak with your own voice, to your own communities, about your own needs and ideas and beliefs'. At the same time, it began to draw upon, and contribute to, the regional and international discourse on culture and resistance.

By 1982, all this had set the stage for the Culture and Resistance Festival hosted by Medu in Botswana.



Don't Support Apartheid, designed by Keith Bingle with Eldorado Park Collective for anti-PC, Johannesburg, 1984. No. 150

ENDNOTES

- 1 Interview with Thozamile Botha, leading figure in the 1979 Ford strike and Port Elizabeth Black Civic Organisation, quoted on <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/congress/sactu/wff4.htm> accessed 2006.
- 2 Description of Fatti's and Moni's strike from <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/congress/sactu/wff4.htm> accessed 2006.
- 3 Lou Almon, Interview, 11 April 2005, Johannesburg.
- 4 Jayesh Bhana, Interview, 17 July 2004, Johannesburg.
- 5 For a detailed history of student movements in this period, see student newspaper Saspu National, State of the Nation: In a State of Emergency, Oct-Nov 1985, Johannesburg, pp. 17-20.
- 6 Ibid, 1985.
- 7 Janet Cherry, Interview, 5 June 2005, Port Elizabeth.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Razia Saleh, Interview, 12 July 2004, Johannesburg.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Jayesh Bhana interview.
- 12 Ismael Moss interview.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 'Al weer daai pamflette' — Mrs Adams finds out about the new union. From 'We speak for ourselves', Book 2, Organising Media (using media to build organisations). Cape Town: Grassroots Publications, May 1984.
- 15 Kevin Humphrey interview.
- 16 Mzwakhe Nthlabatsi, Interview, November 1999, Johannesburg.
- 17 Kevin Humphrey interview.
- 18 Reedwaan Vally, Interview, November 1999, Johannesburg.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Marlene Powell, interview 2 1 July 2005 Johannesburg.
- 21 Dilip Waghmarae interview.
- 22 Manfred Zylla interview, 15 June 2004, Johannesburg.

