

BUILDING BROAD-BASED LABOR COALITIONS

I bring you greetings from the 80,000 members of AFSCME Illinois, and from all the unions in the Illinois Labor Network Against Apartheid.

We want to thank the American Committee on Africa and Mike Fleshman for organizing this national workshop, and District 1199 of AFSCME for hosting us.

And a very special thanks goes to Nomonde Ngubo for all she has taught us, and to the New York Labor Committee, Vicki Williams, and especially Kate Pfordresher, who led us in the right direction when we formed the Illinois Labor Network and guided us through our first three years.

We salute our union leaders who are in the forefront of the anti-apartheid movement: Bill Lucy of AFSCME, Owen Bieber of UAW, Richard Trumpka of UMWA, among many others.

I want to share with you today not the mechanics, nor the specific steps of how we organized ourselves in Illinois. Nor will I go into our rather unique structure. Rather, I want to share with you some of what we have learned and what has worked for us.

The Labor Network began four and one-half years ago, at the instigation in large part of the Chicago Committee in Solidarity with Southern Africa and the encouragement of the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists.

We have touched many. Opened the eyes, hearts and pocketbooks of many union members to the struggle of South African workers. This is our own small contribution to the broader anti-apartheid movement and to the liberation struggle.

Like you, we've marched, picketed, sent letters, been arrested, testified, and answered questions. In that process, we have learned a great deal about South Africa, and much more about ourselves.

First, we had to ask ourselves this questions: Are we anti-apartheid activists who happen to be union members? Or are we union activists who got our unions involved in anti-apartheid work?

The answer for us as an organization is that we are UNION activists. We act on the principle that it is to the benefit of the liberation struggle and a detriment to the South African regime that we are representing more than just ourselves -- we represent our unions.

We've learned to work together: leaders, staff, and rank and file members in many different unions, for our unity is far more important than our differences. As it was during the fight to pass the Dellums Sanctions bill in Congress, or during the Free Moses Mayekiso campaign. Or during the visit of Winnie and Nelson Mandela to the U.S.

The Labor Network was represented by different unions. During the Mandela tour in the U.S., some of us went to the AFSCME convention in Miami; the UAW represented us in New York; CBTU represented us in D.C.; and about one hundred plus union members from many unions in the network attended the UAW rally in Detroit.

We've learned to identify each other first by our union, before any other organizational identification.

The Labor Network does not take sides in union disputes. We're careful to separate our roles. We operate on consensus. We meet on neutral ground. We try to create a balance of speakers for our programs.

Collectively we've learned to work through the maze of labor structures. With persistence, we found that these structures can actually work. We learned a lot about that from South African unions.

As a new organization, four years ago, the Labor Network was faced with a 24-hour notice of the South African Ambassador's first Midwest visit. Before we moved ahead with any plans, we contacted the Hotel and Restaurant Employees Union. And found out about their discrimination suit against the hotel where the South African government people were staying, and their kick-off of a boycott of the hotel Nikko. The Hotel and Restaurant Employees union appreciated being consulted prior to any action, and they joined us on the picket line then and since.

The point is that we do not participate in actions until we have touched base with those unions whose members may in some way be affected by our action. That seems like an obvious thing to do, but we find it not so obvious in practice.

We've also learned to let people within labor speak out for themselves on apartheid. They may not be experts, but they can often communicate better with members than many anti-apartheid activists. It's important to present information within a context that workers and unions here can identify with.

We've found that it pays to be cautious and careful.

Not everyone who comes from South Africa is the real thing. Three years ago a so-called NUMSA Representative planned a Chicago visit. Several unions scheduled meetings with him. We faxed NUMSA through the UAW to ask the purpose of the visit -- only to be faxed in return that he was not authorized to speak for the union, on any subject.

Because we are careful and check things out, many unions and other groups contact us before responding to a request about South Africa.

We look to many sources for information and assistance, and are in frequent contact with other anti-apartheid groups in Chicago, New York, D.C., and elsewhere.

Our role with our unions is not one-sided. It is true we depend on them for financial support. But our educational role is by far the most important thing that we do. It is not as tangible as various campaigns. But it has made possible the campaigns that we have done.

We have become a pipeline for what is happening in South and Southern Africa -- one in which no one person is indispensable.

One purpose for serving as educators is to get labor to speak with a louder and clearer voice on apartheid. Therefore we in the Labor Network try to speak with one voice. We made sure that all unions were on board around the three S's: Solidarity, Sanctions, and Shell Oil.

Now, in order for us to speak with one voice, we had to put our own personal political views aside. We work together to support international labor solidarity and the freeing of South Africa. We work together to fight for sanctions and responsible disinvestment. We work together to oppose union-busting tactics of international corporations. And we support the right of South Africans to choose their own politics.

We educate ourselves and our unions, in part by letting South Africans educate us. They can and do speak well for themselves. COSATU is pretty clear about its objectives. We distribute their literature to explain what is happening in South Africa.

If we listen carefully, we can hear what they are saying, and then support their calls for action. That is the way we have tried to communicate with our local union affiliates.

As we struggled to understand non-racialism in South Africa, we slowly began to comprehend shades of difference between racism in South Africa, with a majority black population, and racism in the U.S., with a minority black population.

That understanding has helped us to reach out to trade unionists in the U.S., both black and white. We found many confused and curious about what is happening in South Africa. Many ask us, how is it possible for a small minority of whites to have such a dominant, and destructive, role in southern Africa, when the overwhelming population is African?

Having to explain to our members the difference in apartheid in South African and racism in the U.S. has been another eye opener for us. We've had to educate ourselves and others, and learn to express ourselves better, so others could understand.

We began to understand more about the nature of fear and raw courage. About what it would mean to have troops stationed in our neighborhood, to be banned, to live in a so-called homeland, in a single-sex hostel. Or to live with the violence of the government and Inkatha.

At the same time, we felt a necessity to stress the mass democratic movement's opposition to apartheid. To let it sink in that people in South Africa do not take apartheid sitting down. That their fight has been long and hard.

We have to express how and why it should make a difference to our members, without overloading them with information.

We learned that because of their struggle, many South Africans understand better than we do what democracy and self-determination should be about. And we can learn from their struggle and be rejuvenated by it.

We also had to face the expectations about us by those who come from South Africa, and elsewhere.

We found out that their expectations of us were different from our own realities, and just how much people around the world think that most Americans have money flowing out of their pockets. Sometimes visitors know little of the real poverty that exists here in the U.S., particularly for African-American communities. Or of our history in combatting racism in the U.S.

Even anti-apartheid activists seem to think at times that we in the U.S. labor movement are loaded with money. So we've found the expectations of us, in the U.S. labor movement, to be distorted. Just as our views of South Africa are distorted.

We in the Labor Network have never found any of these lessons "easy." And the barriers increase when we have to mobilize our members, as well as ourselves. But this is our task. To learn from others and to educate others.

So while we've been disappointed at times, clearly our disappointments have encouraged us to work harder.

We've met strong leaders of the liberation movement and U.S. anti-apartheid leaders who never mentioned the words COSATU or NACTU.

We've come face to face with some anti-labor attitudes in various movements in the U.S., including the anti-apartheid movement. It surprised us to find out how uninformed some anti-apartheid activists are about workers' issues.

When we found ourselves unable at times to comprehend some things about South Africa, or when South Africans did not understand some things about us, we worked harder at creating a common understanding. That is part of our unending task.

The South African union movement is vibrant. Determined. Courageous. At times, we are in awe of its accomplishments. It is similar in some ways to the days of the CIO in the U.S. South African unions seem to have learned from some of our mistakes, and those of unions elsewhere. And that's as it should be.

The liberation movement in South Africa is fueled in large part by black workers. They have a monstrous job ahead to redo the political and economic structures after apartheid falls. But they can and do learn from the failures and successes of unions around the world.

The labor movement in the U.S., with all of its faults, has brought a better life to millions upon millions of once poverty stricken workers, black and white. It brought us the 40-hour work week, social security, and so on. It has brought a measure of respect for public and private sector workers alike.

Today, we in labor fight for our survival. These are tough times for the American labor movement. We've lost a lot of battles. But we hope to win the war.

If you want to build a broad-based labor coalition, you can't belittle labor here, and then win support from *for* labor in South Africa. It doesn't work like that. To build international labor solidarity through a broad-based labor coalition, we must bring our own union members and leaders along with us.

In summation, for us building a labor coalition has come to mean building a coalition that's respected by local unions, by the liberation movement, and by ourselves. It's about taking down barriers that prevent communication, and setting up links between unions here and unions in South Africa that encourage solidarity.

We have much to learn from each other, to share with each other, and to help each other accomplish. To the Illinois Labor Network, that is what international labor solidarity is all about.

Thank you.