



A campaign
initiated by
The Africa Fund.

Bill Cosby
Honorary Chairman

Dumisani S. Kumalo
Coordinator

July, 1989

DETAINED TO DEATH:
APARTHEID'S PRISONS WITHOUT WALLS

June 6th 1989, the third anniversary of the imposition of the State of Emergency has come and gone in South Africa and despite claims of change in the air in Pretoria, apartheid continues to thrive as the emergency begins its fourth year. Despite the success of the detainee "Hunger Strike" campaign which resulted in the release of over 700 detainees, the practice of detention without trial has not stopped. Opponents of apartheid are still being arrested, held, without charge or trial for indefinite periods of time and, with access to their families or lawyers denied.

The "released" detainees come home to continue their incarceration in the form of restrictions limiting who and how many people they may meet, where they may go and when and, what they can say. Over 80% of the released detainees have been placed under virtual house arrest as a result of severe restrictions. In addition, such activists have become vulnerable to right-wing vigilante attacks, by having their movements made predictable. Christy Ntuli was hacked to death on his way to report to the police station which he was required to do.

Detentions continue and the different groups in the mass democratic movement remain the government's prime focus of attack. Within South Africa's jails many of the people detained in 1986 and before are still being held without charge or trial untouched by the random releases won by the hunger strikers. And then there are the many convicted political prisoners whose only true crime was opposing apartheid. Among them is 79 year old Oscar Mpetha, a labor leader who was taken to jail in a wheelchair in 1980 and despite suffering from kidney failure, and diabetes which caused him to lose one leg, was denied permission to bury his wife in 1986 and his son in April of this year.

We urge you to join us in demanding the immediate and unconditional release of Oscar Mpetha and all other political prisoners and detainees being held both in prison and in their own homes. We must maintain pressure on Pretoria and remind them that the United States has not forgotten South Africa's detainees. Write letters to your local newspapers, alert them to this appeal

Send letter of support to Oscar Mpetha at M.1299, Nyanga, Capetown 7755, South Africa.

Send protests to:

Adriaan Vlok
Minister of Law and Order
Private Bag x256,
Capetown 8000,
South Africa

P.W. Botha
State Presidents Office
Private Bag x213
Pretoria, 0001
South Africa

The Africa Fund, 198 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10038 (212) 962-1210

Tilden J. LeMelle
Chairman

Jennifer Davis
Executive Director



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Oscar Mpetha will turn 80 on August 5th. He is currently serving a five year jail sentence, despite the fact that he is a diabetic, suffers from kidney failure and has had one leg amputated. Oscar's only crime was organizing unions and opposing apartheid. Efforts to have Oscar released, even on humanitarian grounds have had no results, and there is a growing fear that he might spend his last years in jail.

In the United Kingdom a large group of organizations including many major labor unions have launched the JOINT CAMPAIGN AGAINST THE REPRESSION OF TRADE UNIONISTS IN SOUTH AFRICA AND NAMIBIA and plan a campaign in support of Mpetha and calling for his immediate release. Letters of support and of protest are being encouraged.

The apartheid regime must be made aware that the United States has not forgotten Oscar Mpetha, nor any of the other political prisoners and detainees being held in South Africa's jails.

The Africa Fund, 198 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10038 (212) 962-1210

Tilden J. LeMelle
Chairman

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Executive Director

JOINT CAMPAIGN AGAINST THE REPRESSION OF TRADE UNIONISTS IN SOUTH AFRICA AND NAMIBIA

Supporting Unions

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FREE OSCAR MPETHA!

Oscar refused permission to bury his son.

The unjust treatment of South African trade union veteran Oscar Mpetha by the apartheid regime appears to have no limits. Oscar's eldest son Karl was unfortunately killed in a traffic accident. He was buried on Saturday, 8th April.

During the week prior to the funeral, international pressure grew on the regime to allow Oscar to bury his son. On another occasion, Oscar had been refused permission to attend his wife's funeral. Appeals were made by the British Government, the Trades Union Congress, the Commonwealth TUC and a large number of national trade unions affiliated to the AAM to allow Oscar to be released this time.

However, despite being aged seventy-nine, suffering from diabetes and having lost a leg through a gangrene infection, Oscar was considered too much of a threat to the South African regime to be allowed out of prison. The British Government's silence on this inhuman act was deafening. Joint Campaign convenor Colin Adkins said: "Mrs Thatcher's 'sea change' in South Africa has had no benefits for this political prisoner. We are going to step up the campaign to force the regime's hand".

The Joint Campaign is asking campaign supporters to:

1. Distribute and disseminate the campaign material to even greater numbers of British people.
2. Write letters highlighting Oscar's case to national and local newspapers.
3. Protest to the South African regime. Write to Mr Adriaan Vlok, Minister of Law and Order, Private Bag 2256, Capetown 8000, South Africa.
4. Call on the Foreign Secretary to condemn this inhuman act. Write to the The Right Honourable Sir Geoffrey Howe MP, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, King Charles St, London, SW1.
5. Send messages of support to Oscar. Write to M.1299, Nyanga, Cape Town, 7755, South Africa.

The Joint Campaign is planning to place solidarity adverts in national newspapers to coincide with Oscar's 60th birthday (5th August).

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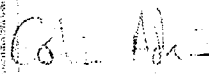
20th July, 1989.

Dear Friends,

Further to my letter of the 10th July, I enclose some campaign leaflets promoting activity in this country around the 80th birthday of imprisoned trade union veteran Oscar Mpetha. I hope that your organisation will be able to mount protests in your country.

Oscar's son, Themba Mpetha, is also available to speak in your country on the need to step up campaigning for the immediate and unconditional release for his father.

Yours sincerely,


Colin Adkins,

Trade Union Secretary.

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Joint Campaign Briefing No 2

OSCAR MPETHA – THE FATHER OF THE NATION AND TRADE UNIONISM

Oscar Mafakafaka Mpetha was born in the Transkei at Thinana in the Mouth Fletcher district on 5 August 1909. He was the second of six children.

In 1925 Oscar was interpreting at meetings and doing clerical work for the Industrial and Commercial Union.

Oscar Mpetha first came into contact with political organisations in 1937 while working in Groot-Schuur. This organisation took the form of a Night School Movement. It was at this stage that he met Bill Endreus, a trade unionist. He was impressed by Bill Endreus's non-racialism and commitment to workers. At this time Oscar also had contact with the National Liberation League and was attempting to organise hospital workers.

After qualifying as a road master, he went to work for a contractor in the Malmersbury district as a sub-foreman. It was here in 1940, that he organised the first strike of his trade union career when he led labourers in their struggle for higher wages. The strike succeeded but he was moved to Veldrift and isolated from other workers. He decided to leave his job as a road worker and went to work in a fish factory in Bergriver Mouth.

In 1942 the poor conditions in the factory prompted Oscar to write to the African Parliamentary representative, a man called Molteno, for advice. Molteno passed his letter on to Ray Alexander of the newly-formed Food and Canning Workers' Union. He promptly sent Oscar a copy of the constitution and application forms. Oscar started organising his fellow workers into the union. Oscar's position as a factory worker prompted others, including white workers, to join the union. Oscar Mpetha was elected branch secretary and asked to cover Saldanha Bay, Paternoster and Saint Helena Bay.

Oscar continued to work as a volunteer organiser for the FCWU and was elected to the National Executive Committee in 1947. In that year, the union was forced under threat of deregistration to form a separate African Food and Canning Workers' Union (AFCWU) for African members. This was due to the Industrial Conciliation Act, which prevented Africans from belonging to registered unions. Throughout this time Oscar had to overcome hostility from his employers with regard to his union work. He did this by mobilising the workforce to ward off victimisation. As an NEC member, Oscar took unpaid leave in order to travel to other towns to organise workers. As the African Food and Canning Workers' Union was expanding, the decision came to employ a full-time general secretary. Beatrice Nkewu was elected but was replaced after only one month by Oscar. His election as general secretary occurred in December 1949.

As an organiser, Oscar stood out for his courage and creativity, using every opportunity to reach and organise the canning workers. On several occasions he went to work in factories with the express purpose of organising the workers from within. Often, after two weeks or so, when he had recruited the 'nucleus' of a committee and signed up as many members as he could, he would leave the factory. His previous employer would then be confronted by Oscar, who had organised the workers under the boss's nose.

In his capacity as general secretary, Oscar took part in most of the union's activities nationally, visiting branches as part of the head office team that toured the various regions where a union was organised. There he would address meetings and assist the local organisers with signing up members, training local organisers to deal with union work and handle grievances. Whenever there were strikes or major matters to deal

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with, Oscar would be part of the head office team that would rush over to sort everything out. Thus Oscar was involved with the major strike at Wolseley in 1954, as well as the strike at the Cape Town meat factory at Spierdams and the boycott of Langeberg in 1959, to name but a few.

Another important role Oscar played was to represent workers in courts. This he was able to do until legal changes were made to prevent such practices. Within the trade union movement more broadly, Oscar was part of the FCWU and AFCWU delegation attending conferences of the South African Trades and Labour Council. He addressed meetings and spoke out against the state's attempt to racialise the trade union movement and the eventual capitulation of the South African Trades and Labour Council to a racialistic expediency. On several occasions he was the only African trade unionist at these meetings, where he urged delegates not to renounce working class solidarity.

Harassment and intimidation by the police was a general feature in the lives of union leaders. This, however, intensified from the mid-1950s onwards with the introduction of banning orders. In January 1955, under the Suppression of Communism Act, Oscar was issued with a two-year prohibition on attending meetings. The ban did not prevent him from acting as general secretary of the AFCWU but it did hamper union work. Moreover, it did not end there, for soon after the ban was issued a dispute broke out in Vredenburg. He went there and addressed the workers and when he had finished he was arrested by waiting police for disobeying his banning order. He was found guilty by the Vredenburg magistrate and sentenced to six months' hard labour. The case was taken to appeal and won. From then on Oscar was more careful to avoid being outwitted and caught again. Early in 1959, however, Oscar Mpethe was rebanned under the Act for a further five years, and this time restricted to the magisterial district of Wynburg. The restriction order was a major obstacle but Oscar did not cease travelling altogether; instead he took care to avoid the police whenever he visited branches on union business.

In his capacity as general secretary of AFCWU Oscar was extensively involved in the activities of the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU). The Food and Canning Workers' Union was one of the most important SACTU affiliates and many of its officials were also executive members of SACTU in the Western Cape. Oscar travelled to various parts of the country, despite the banning order, to organise and address meetings of the canning industry's non-union workers and sign them up for SACTU committees. In addition to this, Oscar participated very actively in debates of SACTU strategy and directives. His contribution to SACTU was eventually curtailed by the banning orders. He was detained in 1960 under the state of emergency. He served a prison sentence and was released in 1964.

In 1951 Oscar joined the African National Congress and was elected secretary of the Cape region. As a member of the ANC, Oscar argued for a progressive, non-racial approach to politics and against the Africanists. Thus in 1953 he opposed the view in the Cape Congress that the ANC should revert to exclusive Africanism. After the Defiance Campaign in 1954 he argued to support the participation of the Congress of Democrats in the Congress of the People Campaign, against the views of the Cape president Professor Matthews. In 1958 he was elected as president of the ANC in the Cape until it was banned in South Africa.

In 1978, Oscar Mpethe was invited to open the annual national conference of the Food and Canning Workers' Union as one of its founder members. He had not attended union meetings since he was forced to resign as a result of his banning order. Many other leaders had been banned, with the result that the union had become progressively weaker. The change in leadership in 1976 saw the union growing once again. Oscar was so impressed by what he saw that at the conference he decided to offer to work for the Union. The union members were greatly impressed by Oscar's strong speech and appointed him as national organiser.

As it happened, Oscar was to work for two years for the union before he was once again removed. Those two years were, however, of great importance for the African Food and Canning Workers' Union and the development of the trade union movement. Oscar's contribution to the union leadership was outstanding. The employers were strongly resisting the growth of the unions such as the FCWU and there were a series of major strikes waged by Oscar at Rainbow Chickens, at Fattis and Monis in Bellville, at Kromme in Grabouw and Sea Harvest in Saldanha. His experience, courage and perseverance were an inspiration.

The union was also trying to re-establish itself nationally. Oscar spent long periods reorganising the union in the Transvaal. He spent many months in East London also and it is for his organisational work there that he will be most remembered. He succeeded in organising LKB and WP Preserving Company, which were the first factories to be organised by any of the independent unions in the area, this being achieved in both instances by a short strike.

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Oscar achieved all this at the age of 70 years and whilst suffering from diabetes. He would frequently fall asleep whilst being driven to a meeting. But when it came to the workers, whether it was a house meeting with a handful of workers or a mass meeting with hundreds present, he was always attentive. 'It remains my belief', he would say 'that there can be no real liberation in this country if workers are not organised.' It was a belief that he practised until his arrest in 1980.

It must also be known that in the 1976 uprising Oscar played a very important role in the struggle by giving direction to the youth organisations who consulted him for advice.

In the launch of the United Democratic Front (UDF) he was elected as one of the national presidents and today he is the honorary president of the UDF and president of the Release Mandela Committee. These elections took place while he was still imprisoned. This shows the trust and respect the South African people have for Oscar as one of their outstanding leaders. The president of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) calls him 'the Father of Trade Unionism'. The wife of the leader of the ANC, Mrs Winnie Nomzame Mandela, says 'Oscar is the Father of the Nation and the People's Leader'.

Jailed under the notorious Terrorism Act, he is serving five years, a sentence the trial judge was reluctantly compelled to impose, despite failing kidneys and the loss of a leg caused by his diabetic condition.

His wife, Rose Nombunga Mpetha, died in 1986 and Oscar was refused permission to go and bury her. The South African regime said he must renounce violence before he can be released but Oscar does not see those who are struggling for freedom as the ones who are using violence. It is the regime that uses violence against innocent people. He refused the offer. Oscar still maintains a clear grasp of the cause for which he has struggled so long: as he recently put it, 'freedom in my lifetime'.

Oscar has served the South African people and will continue doing so until victory is achieved.

Themba Mpetha (son of Oscar)

Send greetings to Oscar. Letters can be sent to M. 1299, Nyanga, Cape Town, 7755, South Africa.



This Briefing was produced by the Joint Campaign who are campaigning for the release of Oscar Mpetha with the Transport and General Workers Union. For further information write to: The Joint Campaign, 13 Mandela Street, London NW4 6DW.

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**FREE
OSCAR
MPETHA**

80TH BIRTHDAY

On Saturday, 5th August, Oscar Mpetha will be celebrating his birthday, still incarcerated in an apartheid jail.

The Free Oscar Mpetha Campaign will be marking his birthday with a number of protest actions. The apartheid regime must be forced to release Oscar in order that he can enjoy his remaining years in freedom.

PROTEST FRIDAY 4 AUGUST

• Picket of South Africa House - Trafalgar Square
12.30 - 2.00pm
Speakers from the Mpetha family, TUC and SACTU.

• Picket of South African Consulate - Nelson
Mandela Place - Glasgow
1.00 - 2.00pm

Further Action

- Write to P W Botha - State President - Union Buildings - Pretoria 0001 - South Africa
- Get your MP to sign the early day motion calling for Oscar's release
- Send a donation to the Free Oscar Mpetha campaign

80TH BIRTHDAY

Send your personal (or your organisation's) message to Oscar using the space below. These will be placed on a giant birthday card and delivered to the South African Embassy on Friday 4th August.

My/our message to Oscar is:

From: _____

- ☐ Please send me/us details of the campaign to release Oscar Mpetha and put me/us on the campaign mailing list.
- ☐ I/we enclose a donation to the Free Oscar Mpetha Campaign and to help cover the costs of the 80th Birthday protests. (Cheques payable to the AAF please).
- ☐ Please send me _____ copies of this leaflet.

Name _____
Organisation (if any) _____
Address _____

BIRTHDAY PROTEST - SEND YOUR BIRTHDAY MESSAGE TO OSCAR USING THE SPACE OVERLEAF

PLEASE RETURN TO THE FREE OSCAR MPETHA CAMPAIGN - 13 MANDELA ST - LONDON NW1 0DW



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