

Anti-Apartheid Solidarity. Podcast .mp3

Transcript by Patricia Wejr

Rod Mickleburgh [00:00:27] Welcome to another edition of On the Line, a podcast that dives into the past for rich, relevant stories from BC's labour history. I'm your host, Rod Mickleburgh. It's been 35 years since that dramatic February day in 1990 when Nelson Mandela walked out of prison and set South Africa on a course to end apartheid and establish majority rule. The fight against apartheid was long, arduous, and often violent, costing many, many lives. But it could not have been won without the solidarity of anti-apartheid groups around the world. In this episode of On the Line, we celebrate the anniversary of Nelson Mandela's release with a look back at the contribution of BC unions and local labour activists to the cause all those years ago. You will hear interviews by the BC Labour Heritage Center's Oral History Project, by Solidarity Alumni of the South African Congress of Trade Unions known as SACTU, and a recent interview with a retired BCGEU activist. It all adds up to an impressive story of international solidarity at its best, where BC unions and activists did everything in their power to press for an end to South Africa's brutal system of apartheid. The movement started in 1976 during a tour of Canada by a white cricket team from South Africa. When the cricketers arrived in Edmonton, two University of Alberta students, Ken Luckhardt and Brenda Wall, organized a mass occupation of the cricket pitch. They were arrested, along with 59 other protesters. All were eventually acquitted. Two years later, Ken and Brenda began volunteering with SACTU, which was the union offshoot of the African National Congress. They published a history of SACTU and began building a solidarity network that would include Canadian unions. Ken Luckhardt came to Vancouver a number of times. Among the first to welcome him were unions belonging to the Confederation of Canadian Unions. In an interview by SACTU Solidarity alumni several years ago, activist Jef Keighley recounted his introduction to the anti-apartheid cause as an overseas volunteer for CUSO and later as a trade unionist with the Canadian Association of Industrial, Mechanical and Allied Workers known as CAIMAW.

Jef Keighley [00:03:04] So basically, I got involved with the South African anti-apartheid movement before I joined the trade union movement. But because there was so much activity in and around the Vancouver & District Labour Council, being a very progressive group, that gave us connections between the citizen activists and labour activists. And so it became like a seamless whole so that we're all working on the same thing together. And then... With the SAAC group, we were organizing a whole series of shop -ins. We would basically organize 30, 40 people to go to a supermarket and with an identified list of South African products, load up their shopping carts with South African products and then head off. You fill it right up and then you head off to the cash register and somebody at the front of the line would say, what and they'd pick up a can. This product is -- for the cashier -- this product's from South Africa, isn't it? Well, yes, it is. Well, it looks like all of this is from South Africa. And then somebody would shout, have you checked your shopping carts? A lot of this stuff is from South Africa. And people would say, oh my God, this is terrible. And everybody'd walk out leaving 30, 40 shopping carts filled to the brim...

Doug Miller [00:04:23] Tremendous [laughter].

Jef Keighley [00:04:24] ... with South African products, and it would take hours and hours for the store to have to pay their staff to put it back on the shelf. And you just kept this up. And eventually some of the stores said, look, this is just too much trouble. And so they would start backing off on that.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:04:38] After that, they went after South African wines, and that prompted more and more unions to join the struggle.

Jef Keighley [00:04:46] But we decided that we wanted to have South African wines delisted from the government liquor stores. And so we started a program. We had these little circular stickers, 'Ban South African Wines', and we talked to printers, and this was through SAAC, and they gave us stickers that had a particularly strong adhesive. And the idea is you'd go into the liquor store and you'd put this sticker over top of the South African label, and it was impossible to remove the sticker without destroying the label, rendering the bottle a non-saleable product. And with that, with lobbying the BC NDP government of Dave Barrett, got it barred. I recall that my wife, Jill White, and myself and my two daughters, we were in the Commercial Drive liquor store, and at that time, they had the display shelves about 40 inches tall. And so our two daughters, four and six years old at the time, they'd have their pockets stuffed full of these stickers and we'd be sitting there in the aisle, so away from where the cashiers could see, and I don't think they really cared because it was just a job for them. And we'd be perusing the wine label and looking over. In the meantime, our two daughters are down, they're short, they're down below and they're sticking all these stickers on the bottles and stuff like that. And when they'd gotten every bottle they could get at we'd sort of wander on and leave the store and we'd go off to some other store and do the same thing. So that was the my pre-union activities but then as I became an activist within my own Local 14, which was in the truck transportation local from the Kenworth truck plant days, I became the editor of our union newsletter. And so we would do all sorts of stories about international affairs, South Africa, the anti-apartheid struggle, and so that, and basically we became, as we moved toward organizing, you had the progressive unions were the Canadian Paperworkers' Union, you had the Postal Workers, you had CUPE, you had CAIMAW, all of the CCU unions were involved, Carpenters, and basically we all came together with the Maritime Labour Center. And we began to organize.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:07:20] Unions were essential to the movement. Not only did they have money, they did not shy away from taking action.

Jef Keighley [00:07:28] The progressive trade unionists became very critical in both making things happen and you know, you'd go to -- you'd need a poster done and you could get, you could go to a union meeting, you could get, you know, they wouldn't mind giving you a donation of 50, but that's not a lot of money to do the work. But all of them, they would have to put that to a membership vote. But you could go to the same trade union and say, can you do \$500 worth of photocopying for us? They'd say, sure. They didn't have to put that to a vote. They just did it. And so the trade unions were absolutely critical, not only in getting the message out to people, but in providing the financing that made it go ahead. And then when Ken Traynor did the tremendous work and the research of all the South African products, and it was then the very best listing that was available. We were working with the ILWU in Vancouver, that's the International Longshoremen Workers Union, which is the longshore union on the West Coast. It has always been very left and progressive as opposed to the one on the East Coast. And the Canadian Brotherhood and Railway and Transport Workers and Tommy McGrath and Dave Crane and people like that who had been on strike in South Africa with Canadian Seamen's Union, who bought their life experience back to Canadian trade unionists. So it wasn't just some academic talking about the need to do this. These were people who had brought their life experience and then they were stalwarts that had enormous respect. I mean, if Tommy said, this is a struggle you support, people who knew Tommy, wouldn't even question that. If Tommy says, this is a struggle we're supporting, yes, you supported the

struggle. We had enormously strong socialist roots throughout the trade union movement, and we capitalized on that. We'd talk with the Longshore Union, and... based on the work that Ken Traynor had done, we'd know there was a ship coming in, and we'd have the manifest ahead of time. And the docks would start at 6:30 in the morning, and so the longshoremen would say, okay, you guys make sure that you're there at six o'clock in the morning. And you could get away with three or four or five people. They were the picket line. The guys would show up, whoa, there's a picket line. We're not crossing the picket line. And off they'd go. And they'd have the day off. And then the shipping companies would seize the pension contributions for the entire month. Then the longshore would go to court and they would get the money back. But they did it over and over again and they did it because they were interested in solidarity because, you know, everybody on the coast because it is a coastal city, they had enormous amount of travel experience and personal experience more so than you'd find in an interior city.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:10:30] After a group of progressive trade unionists got together to set up a Vancouver solidarity branch of the South African Congress of Trade Unions, the local fight intensified.

Jef Keighley [00:10:42] And we started doing organizing, we started doing education. We'd go around to the various unions, the union meetings and talk about it. We'd be helping raise, get them to make ongoing commitments to finance the SACTU Committee because we said, look, this is a long struggle and it's great if you give a hundred dollars once in a while, it'd be a hell of a lot better if you give \$75 a month or whatever you could afford. And more and more unions were basically coming on board and they would pass a motion so that every month a cheque would go off to Toronto to keep the work going. And then we started organizing a series of benefits. And I think we had the first benefit in 1986 and couldn't get everybody into the Maritime Labour Center. And then the second one we had, it was in '87, it was May 8th, 1987, we had a real great lineup. We had the Total Gospel Choir out of Seattle come up... [Music: 'Shine' by the Total Experience Gospel Choir] ...And back in those days, people drank a lot more when they went out than they do now. So that helped to raise the money. And at the end of the night, I was the chair of the SACTU Committee in Vancouver. And we had paid all of our people, nominal gratuity or honorarium really, paid all of our expenses. And on Sunday morning, my two daughters, who were the label stickers on the wine bottles, got to count the money and they were just overjoyed and we had raised more than \$12,000 that night.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:12:44] Colleen Jordan, who spent 15 years as Secretary -Treasurer of CUPE BC, was another activist involved in the fight. She was interviewed by Keith Reynolds for the BC Labour Heritage Center's oral history project.

Colleen Jordan [00:12:58] So, for example, we would, CUPE National has the week labour schools, right? So we have those week-long schools at Naramata, where we're teaching rank and file members bargaining. So what we would do, we would bring a delegate from Cuba to Naramata for the week, and they would sit at dinner, they would come and speak in the classes, they would get to know the people individually. I remember I actually drove a brother from South Africa up to Naramata myself one year for the conference, right? So they'd speak to the delegates. So they get real solidarity and identification between -- you actually know somebody who's a union activist in South Africa, who's a union activist in Nicaragua, and having them come and speak at Convention, be part of those kind of things, to convince the Locals that, and it's not charity, it's solidarity. You're supporting their work... Here's an example, one of my favorites. In the SACTU days and the boycotts and all of that, one of the things that we were encouraged

to do was go to City Councils and School Boards and those people and get them to say they will not handle goods from South Africa. So we took a letter to the Burnaby School Board -- and of course the Burnaby School Board said, well like, what kind of goods from South Africa are we ever going to be using? Okay, no problem. Pass a motion. Burnaby School Board will not use goods manufactured in South Africa. So 7:30 in the morning one day, a couple of months later, my phone rings and it's the maintenance director at the School District. He said, Colleen, the grounds guys will not go to work. I said, what the heck's going on? He said, they say you said they're not supposed to touch stuff from South Africa. And we have chicken wire that they're supposed to put up around the grass. And it says, made in South Africa, and they say they're not touching it. I said, yep, that's right. And the School Board, Mr. Maintenance Supervisor, has a policy that the School Board will not have goods from South Africa. He said, well, what am I supposed to do? And I said, well, you better go get some chicken wire that's not made in South Africa because we're not touching it. And your employer, the Burnaby School Board has said they will not handle goods from South Africa. So, okay, you know, amazing, it worked! It really worked.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:15:58] Along with education, resolutions and fundraising, support for the anti-apartheid movement also became an issue at some bargaining tables. Cathy Walker, a longtime activist and health and safety specialist with CAIMAW and then the Canadian Auto Workers, recalls a set of negotiations with the Shellburn Oil Refinery in Burnaby. She was interviewed for the SACTU Solidarity Alumni Project.

Cathy Walker [00:16:28] Well, there were two really fun things that I got to be involved in as a result of all of this. And one is I was a national representative looking after the workers in our Local 12, CAIMAW Local 12, and that was the Shellburn oil refinery workers. So, needless to say, here's this campaign to, you know, boycott Shell and the Shell workers were saying, look, you know, we can't exactly support a boycott of Shell because, you know, this is where we work and we can't really boycott Shell. So what can we do because we've got to knock this issue on the head? So we decided that we would make a bargaining proposal, because we were negotiations, that Shell should no longer import any product from South Africa into Canada. And at that stage, I think there was only, I don't know, some kind of plastic or something that was coming in or feedstock for plastic or something. So it was sort of a symbolic thing, but an important thing to keep the issue on the table. And of course, one thing about Shell, I mean, they're all into this nonsensical sort of, you know, we're really your best friend, you know, and we don't believe in these confrontational negotiations and we're going to listen to you and, you know, all of this stuff. So we would go on at length about Shell in South Africa and had a great opportunity to do so and they would just sit there and bite their tongues and listen and the irony of it was the guy who was the plant manager who was the refinery manager in charge of negotiations, that's where he was from. And I can't remember if he was born, I think he might have been born in Zimbabwe, but basically lived in South Africa and had been working for Shell there. So needless to say, he knew all this stuff intimately, and he just had to sort of sit there and take it. And you know people were saying eventually how are we going to get an agreement because obviously Shell was -- they might have to to listen to us and you know watch videos about it and and put up with us. I said well we're never taking it off the table you know if it doesn't show up in the final offer that people vote on well fair enough but we're not taking it off the table and everybody was completely supportive of that.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:19:12] Not all bargaining had such a direct relationship to South Africa. What became more common was to try and negotiate funds to support SACTU solidarity work, starting with the Canadian autoworkers, Jef Keighley.

Jef Keighley [00:19:26] We created in the CAW the Social Solidarity Fund, and the SACTU work and solidarity work was a big chunk of that, and we weren't successful in every collective bargaining session. But it became an obligation of every union and every national rep that they were to bargain as much as possible into the Solidarity Fund, so that our entire membership, whether they'd been successful in getting the company to go with it, they had in their own way at the various locals, they'd all been part and parcel of approving that, yes, this is a valid thing to put on the table, and that if it's 10 cents, 15 cents, 25 cents, whatever they're able to get, everybody would understand that that's money that otherwise could have gone to their wages, but that they collectively decided to put into international solidarity work.

Music: Nkosi Sikele Afrika performed by the Solidarity Notes Choir [00:20:24] Nkosi sikele Afrika...

Rod Mickleburgh [00:21:16] In March of 1986, many unions took part in a special Solidarity Week of Action against apartheid. Telephone operators refused to process calls from South Africa. South African mail went unsorted at the post office, and, as much as they could, union members refused to handle goods from South Africa. Jef Keighley recalled how hard unions worked to inform their members about what was at stake and how they could help.

Jef Keighley [00:21:46] There was more a matter of getting information out and they would read about the big bulletins on the board or in newsletters, talking about what was going on and why it was going on, even if there wasn't something that was immediate to their work situation that they could do about it. But where it was, they were hearing enough stories that what they could see is five or six or seven or eight different kinds of workplaces that could take action, were taking action and that sends the message that this is a legitimate form of political organizing even if you're not particularly involved in it. Because who knows, next time there may be something that you could do in your workplace whether it's dealing with South Africa or some other issue.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:22:32] Later that same year, during negotiations for a new contract, the BC Government Employees Union made clear to the government that their members would no longer allow South African wines to be carried in provincial liquor stores. Randy Pearson was first Vice Chair of the Union's Liquor and Warehouse Component. He talked about the boycott with Patricia Wejr.

Randy Pearson [00:22:56] I was involved in the negotiations on the liquor component, liquor and warehouse component. I was not the leader of the component at that time, but there was a tremendous amount of issues around privatization. Of course, that included liquor stores as well. So we were extremely busy, very active. And again, at this time, of course, was the pressure to boycott South African products, to let it be known that we do not support the apartheid regime. So that came up in the fall at some point, and we were in negotiations. And the president of our union said, look, we need to move on this as well. What can we do as government employees? And I got involved as well. And we decided we would no longer handle any product from South Africa. So that included removing products from the shelves of the liquor stores throughout the province and warehouse workers would not load any liquor products for delivery within the province. So they were simply not touching them in the warehouse. And in most cases, we removed the bottles right off the shelf. And there wasn't a lot of pushback at that time. Simply, we were part of the overall movement. And so, yeah, there was a fair bit of coverage around that. And

quite honestly, our members were enthusiastic about participating, and it all went well. You know, there's always a few hiccups, of course but by and large, it was well supported and we complied with that.

Patricia Wejr [00:24:58] That's interesting. And what about community support?

Randy Pearson [00:25:01] Oh, yeah, I mean, people were fine with that. There was lots of press around it. And I think people were getting pretty fed up with the apartheid regime. And there wasn't any real significant that I can remember push back from any business communities or anybody at all. In fact, I often wondered why we handled this in the past. But it was, you know, it took a long time to stand up to this apartheid regime. And of course, Canada had simply listed the African National Congress as a terrorist organization, along with a lot of other Western nations. And it was a bit disgusting, of course, but there was a movement, of course, internationally. And, you know, labour in Canada joined in and said, let's push it as far as we can. And we did our bit and certainly everybody was proud of that. And I know when we went to the BC Federation of Labour Convention in November of '86, there was resolutions passed to do whatever we can to put economic pressure on the South African regime to release Mandela and to change course in their apartheid system and hold elections, I suppose. I don't remember all about it. We were very busy at that time... But yeah, many from my component, the liquor component, we were at the mics at BC Fed and including myself then, you know, let's take it as much as we can and stop any business whatsoever with the with South African apartheid regime at all across Canada. So yeah, it went well.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:26:56] Less than four years later, Nelson Mandela was a free man, and South Africa's horrendous system of apartheid was all but finished. Vancouver's SACTU Solidarity Committee, however, wasn't finished. Their work carried over into South Africa's first free election, held in 1994. Jef Keighley went to South Africa as an election monitor. It was an eye -opener.

Jef Keighley [00:27:26] And then when Mandela's election was coming up in '94, thankfully on Ken's recommendation, the trade union movement around the world had been asked to supply teams to go into South Africa to do violence monitoring six or seven weeks in advance of the actual election. Ken had put forward my name, and so I led a joint CAW CUPE delegation into South Africa. We went from Johannesburg down to Cape Town. We ended up in Inkatha territory with some ANC guy. We went into the Thousand Hills area and we took a bunch of Mandela election posters. It was just one of the greatest things in my life was to be in the Cape Town City Hall, in the plaza. Every dam post had a Mandela poster on it ahead of the election. And we took a stack of them into Thousand Hills to deliver them to a principal of a school in that area. We went in there, the whole of the five of us, there were five of us, three CAW and two CUPE people, and we had to put the posters face down so when we got stopped in traffic people couldn't look into the car and see and identify ANC. We delivered the posters to the ANC and then we went to the principal. And they were -- we went to see the chief in one area and he wasn't home. And so we waited and we looked, but we ran into him on the road.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:29:12] This led to some tense moments for the Canadian delegation.

Jef Keighley [00:29:16] He said, look, told this chief, you better get your people out of there. There are three busloads of armed Inkatha people coming in here next week and they intend to kill everybody they can find. He was -- we had a quick meeting with him and

he said, I can't stay, I got to get people out of here. They were going to send them over the hills and with the expectation that all the houses would be burned, but it was at least going to save the people. And so I said, is there anything we can do? And he said, the only thing that will save us is if the army comes in. And I said, you trust the white South African army? And he says, no but they will have to document stuff so thoroughly that if the army's here, Inkatha won't dare to come in. So we beatled it back to Cape Town, and I got on the phone with Bob White and CLC and the International Trade Union Federation and Lloyd Axworthy was then a major factor in there, and basically started raising hell. And the telegrams started flying back and forth, and the military did come in and it avoided the massacre. But when I got back to Canada, I got a report that the principal that we had delivered the posters to had been macheted to death because he was distributing the Mandela posters.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:31:07] There were no such life and death situations in far-off Canada, but those involved in the struggle in South Africa had to be constantly on their guard. Jef Keighley.

Jef Keighley [00:31:19] Our house was the SACTU hotel and then later the COSATU hotel and the ANC hotel and Peter Mahlangu, he was staying in our place quite regularly and we were going out to a major public meeting at the Britannia Center, in the south of Commercial Drive in Vancouver and I was chairing the meeting and he was a terrific speaker in the sense that he could speak right off the cuff. And I'm sitting down, we're just finishing up dinner, getting ready to go out and making some notes. And he said, what are you doing? I said, I'm just making some notes for tonight's meeting. He said, well, don't you know what you want to say? I said, yeah, I know what I want to say, I'm just going to get my notes together. And he said, Jesus Christ, if we were running around South Africa with our notes tucked in our back pocket, we'd all be dead.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:32:15] BC unions and committed labour activists like Jef Keighley can be proud of their role in the worldwide campaign to end apartheid in South Africa. Their years of commitment have left a lasting legacy of unions standing up against racism and other social injustices. Once again, Jef Keighley.

Jef Keighley [00:32:37] There was no question that South Africa was amongst the most egregious example that you could look at for discrimination. And only the willfully naive could ignore that. And so that helped all sorts of people, myself included, see far lesser examples of discrimination and racism as being in the same ilk and the same path. I think that helped a lot.

Music: Nkosi Sikele Afrika performed by the Solidarity Notes Choir [00:33:06] Osa, osa...

Rod Mickleburgh [00:33:32] We hope you've appreciated our look back at a time when unions around the world, including here in BC, took a stand in support of racial equality and justice, not in their own backyard but on behalf of people thousands of miles away in South Africa. It was international solidarity at its most inspiring.

Music: Theme song, "Hold the Fort" [00:34:00] For we are coming, Union Hearts be strong!

Rod Mickleburgh [00:34:06] Thanks, as always, to the other members of On the Line's podcast collective, Donna Sacuta of the BC Labour Heritage Center, producer John

Mabbott, and researcher Patricia Wejr, who also shaped the script and did the interview with Randy Pearson. Much thanks as well to the Canadian Anti-Apartheid Activist History Project for their interviews. You can find out more about them on their website. They also want to acknowledge the indispensable work done by Doug Miller, a SACTU activist from Quebec who began the history project in the 1980s in conjunction with CKUT, 90.3 FM in Montreal, and who was responsible for all of their vital recordings. Last, but definitely not least, a grateful tip of the old podcast hat for the Solidarity Notes Choir for their rendition of South Africa's beautiful national anthem. There is also a sampling from Seattle's wonderful, Total Experience Gospel Choir. I'm your historic host, Rod Mickleburgh. We'll see you next time, On The Line.