

Recording made by Mr. Michael Harmel on the early history of the South African Peace Movement, 11th July 1972.

We didn't have any formal Peace Movement at the time the Stockholm Appeal was launched, but when it was launched some of us in Johannesburg thought we couldn't stand by and not do anything about it. Looking in the files of "New Age" I have a few items about the beginnings of this. We called a public meeting: it was organised by a body which, I suppose, has almost been forgotten, called the League for Democratic Rights. It was under the League's auspices, but it wasn't a specifically a peace meeting although it was to launch a campaign in support of the Stockholm Appeal. And this meeting was held on the 14th September, 1950: it was addressed by Comrade Szur, by Hilda Watts (now Bernstein) and myself. The Rev. Thompson was in the Chair. I think it's possible that over a hundred people turned up, maybe quite a good deal more than that because the time.

Perhaps I should say a little more about the man who was in the Chair, that is the Rev. D.C. Thompson. He was a Methodist Minister - I say 'was' not because he's dead but because he's no longer a Minister; he had for many years been associated with many democratic causes. I'm rather prejudiced in favour of him because he's a long-standing/<sup>personal</sup> friend of mine; he had been, for example, one of those sponsoring a fund for the African Mine-Workers' Union, prior to the Great Strike of 1946, and he continued in that field wherever he could, of helping the working people to organise although he didn't go out to the mines himself of course. Another thing that he was, and I am sure still is, was a very staunch and determined advocate of peace and friendship with the Soviet Union, and he was President of what we older ones used to call the F.S.U. - Friends of the Soviet Union - but during the war, when it became quite the thing at one stage when the Red Army was defending us all, they changed the name to the South African Society for Peace & Friendship with the Soviet Union, they got the support of one or two Cabinet Ministers, <sup>Jan</sup> ~~Johan~~ Hofmeyer and Colin Steyn, and it became quite a big, public thing. But the basic person<sup>n</sup>el remained as before with the Rev. Thompson always the head, a very stout upholder and defender of the Soviet Union, long before he ever went there; I think it was much later before he had the opportunity to go. When he did eventually go, he was

immensely thrilled because, as the Supreme Soviet wasn't in session, they allowed him to sit in the chair of the President - the chair of the Supreme Soviet's President - and he was tickled to death about it ! He was a charming man. He was arrested in the Treason Trial, his name figures among the famous 156 who were arrested at the end of ~~1955~~<sup>1956</sup>; they were flown from all parts of the country in military 'planes to Johannesburg. This was a trial which dragged on for a long time: some of them were released after the preparatory examination, but it was five years before all the accused were found Not Guilty. During the trial they were held on bail. Chief Lutuli was the head of this group. Well, of course they couldn't do any work because the trial was going on every day, the sessions of the Court, and this dragged on year after year, and although the Methodist Church is no worse and no better than the other English churches in South Africa - each of them has produced one or two outstanding clergymen - the white congregations which hold the purse-strings in all of them are apt to be just as reactionary as any other group of South Africans, and eventually Thompson was deprived of a living. For a Methodist clergyman you have to be 'called' by a congregation, and his own congregation at Springs had found a substitute for him and nobody else wanted him, so that was tantamount to his being given the sack. He got a job which I imagine he still has which was as a chemist's assistant. I think this man played a most exceptional role, and he deserves to be remembered.

Well then, we started off the Stockholm Appeal and Dr. Molema was the Treasurer General of the African Congress at the time: he signed the Stockholm Peace Appeal and we launched a campaign. We formed a Provisional Committee for a South African Peace Movement, with Thompson in the Chair and Dr. Fox and Cllr. Beckett who was the Mayor-elect - he was about to take office - Leon Levson, a well-known photographer, Dr. Dadoo, all of them supporting the Appeal. It should be observed that from the very beginning our Peace Movement set itself out to broaden itself, not in the sense of finding perhaps some <sup>very</sup> respectable people - although we did try that - but particularly to draw in leading personalities of the National Liberation Movements in S.A. We had felt, all of us I think, from the start - with a few exceptions, but they weren't very important - that this movement must be a movement of all South Africans. There is a tendency

in our country where only white people have the vote, to think that when it comes to big things like peace and international affairs, they are the only ones who would be interested. Some excuse this by saying 'well, the other people are too much absorbed by their daily struggles and troubles and so on', but fundamentally I think this is a chauvinistic point of view however it disguises itself; they're as likely to be killed as other people in a war, and we felt from the start that there mustn't be a shadow or a tinge of any sort of colour-bar in the Peace Movement. We went so far that we felt that the Peace Movement in our country would mean nothing unless, in particular, it was linked with the broad mass liberation movement at all stages, that is the African National Congress, and its allies the Indian Congress and the Coloured Peoples Congress and the Trade Unions, including the non-white Trade Unions.

Five delegates, apparently, went to the Sheffield Congress, and it wouldn't be too difficult to check up who they were, and a number of Unions supported the Appeal, the Commercial Travellers Union, the Food & Canning Workers Union who were mentioned in the "New Age" on the 9th November, 1950, and also the name of W.H. Andrews. I should like to say here too - because these things can be rather meaningless unless one has a little bit of information about the people concerned - that Bill Andrews was in the last year of his life when this report was published in 1950 - he died at the end of that year. He was in many ways the Father of the South African Trade Union Movement: he'd taken part in the early strikes right at the beginning of the century, and he was <sup>80 years</sup> an old man when he died - ~~this can be checked~~ - and he had been the Chairman of the Labour Party in 1914, and the leader of its Parliamentary Group; and when the War broke out Andrews, and his colleagues in the Labour Party, the majority at that time, were amongst the very, very few parties which were affiliated to the Second International which immediately denounced the War. Unlike the very big parties in other capitalist countries such as Germany and France and Britain who decided to follow their ruling classes our Labour Party did not, and that was largely the work of Andrews. They stuck to the terms of the Stuttgart Resolution of the Second International which denounced the forthcoming war: they said it was a millionaires' war waged for the benefit of the armament monopolies and they called on the

working people of our country not to support it. Well, a year after, war-fever had gripped the Labour Party and they removed Andrews and his friends from the leadership; and Andrews and his comrades - I should mention particularly Bunting and Ivan Jones - broke with the Labour Party. They set up something quite new, the International Socialist League, which not only stuck to their previous position on the War, opposing it, but they also began to think what was wrong about the Labour Party they'd been in; and they came to the conclusion that - in search of votes, and only white people had votes - they'd completely neglected the mass of working people, the Africans. And so they began to organise the Africans, and in 1921 they were the main body which helped to found the Communist Party of South Africa of which Andrews was subsequently first General-Secretary, and, in his later years, Chairman. This Party was declared unlawful in 1950: it dissolved itself by a majority vote, and, as a matter of fact, as I've mentioned Andrews, I might add that he was one of two members who voted against dissolution. He was a very old man then, living in retirement at Capetown, and all our activities were centralised at Johannesburg, this collection of signatures, but up to the last year of his life, up to the last weeks of his life, I should say, Andrews was tireless in collecting signatures for that Stockholm Appeal; he was really devoted. It was very moving - when young people could hardly be scurried off their sports-grounds over a week-end to go out and collect a few signatures, - week after week Andrews would send in another sheaf of forms he'd collected personally at Capetown. Those sort of people had something worthwhile in them.

Following the lead we'd taken at Johannesburg a number of prominent citizens in Capetown decided to set up a Peace Committee and to plan a common course of action for peace under the slogan "South Africans Must Act for Peace". Mrs. Bunting would know quite a bit about that, she was associated with it from the beginning.

In Johannesburg we began a more intensive campaign from now onwards, this was our Provisional Committee for a South African Peace Movement, and its character can be judged from the following names, but first of all I will say something about one of its meetings: we had a meeting about Korea in the Trades Hall which was reported on 14th December 1950 so it must have been held a few days before that probably. Again Thompson was in the Chair, Dadoo

spoke, Walter Sisulu who was then General Secretary of the African National Congress and is now serving a life-sentence on Robbin Island with Nelson Mandela and is the most famous of our political prisoners, Willie Nkomo, a doctor from Pretoria, and myself. There was a World Peace Campaign to try to get the Big Five to come together in 1951, the No-War Pact, and we decided that we needed more intensive organisation to do this, not as a Provisional Committee, and we called a Transvaal Conference. This Provisional Committee decided to set up a Transvaal Peace Council: we called a conference, very broadly representative, that was at the end of April 1950; and 167,000 Transvaal people were represented at that conference by various organisations of course. We had such mass organisations as Trade Unions, the African National Congress, the South African Indian Congress, and we had also what was quite a mass organisation at that time, the Springbok Legion - that was a soldiers' organisation for service men and women. Of course at that time the war had long been over so it was most<sup>ly</sup> ex-Service people, ex-Service Men & Women's Organisation, which had been a pretty large organisation by the time the war ended.

The Transvaal Peace Council was then elected and that was the first sort of permanent, formal body that existed in South Africa at that stage - elected at a conference of this sort. The Committee included Thompson as President, J.B. Marks, the well-known African National Congress<sup>and</sup> Trade Union leader, he was the President of the African Mine-Workers Union during the Great Strike of '46, A.P. Dickinson - he was the leader of the Coloured People in the Transvaal at that stage - T.N. Naidoo, a magnificent man, a most interesting person indeed. When Gandhi was in South Africa in the early years of the century he adopted a number of children who had no parents, and one of them was T.N. Naidoo, who was Gandhi's adopted son, but a splendid person in his own right. There was also Dr. Nkomo, and all of those whose names I have mentioned were Vice-Presidents; we had Joint-Secretaries, that was Maulvi Cachalia, and myself. Maulvi, by the way, is a sort of religious personality, a Moslem, a sort of Doctor of Divinity, a student of the Koran. He is now representing the African National Congress in New Delhi.

Signatures to the Stockholm Appeal, that is the world-total, were 300,000,000, as reported in the "New Age." Well, in July the "New Age" reports

Dr. Y.M. Dadoo reporting back on the Berlin Youth Festival of 1951 and saying that the African Youth must defend world peace. The Johannesburg and Capetown Peace Councils now launched a campaign to gain 100,000 signatures in the next three months in a petition to be presented to Parliament. At the World Youth Festival it was reported that South Africa had over 50 delegates. It was at this time, towards the end of 1951 that Thompson went on his tour; he had been to the Festival and he then did a six weeks' tour of Western and Eastern Europe, including the Soviet Union, and then he came to speak in the Duncan Hall, Johannesburg on the 18th October as reported in the "New Age." And at the beginning of 1952 Dawood Seedat returned after a spell as South African representative <sup>at</sup> of the World Youth Federation (<sup>WFDF</sup> ~~WFY~~). In Parliament, Sam Kahn, who was elected on a Communist ticket, ~~was~~ kept his seat for a couple of years or more; they removed him later by changing still further the Suppression of Communism Act, to exclude anybody who had ever been a Communist. He attacked the Government's war policy in Parliament sometime in March 1952.

The Transvaal Peace Council sent a vigorous protest about the war in Korea, including the allegations of germ-warfare. That was in April '52, and we managed - that is the Peace Council managed - to get the South African Trades & Labour Council which was not <sup>a</sup> very left organisation, it was dominated by white Unions, but they did support the peace call, and that was reported on the 1st May 1952 in the "New Age".

There's one incident that I remember very vividly and that I'd like to reminisce briefly about: in May 1952 I was banned, that is to say I received a letter from the Minister of Justice at that time - it would have been Swart (~~Swart~~ <sup>Swart</sup>) I suppose - and he instructed me, with no hearing as to what I'd done wrong, no reasons given and no chance of any appeal, to abstain from any ~~public~~ gatherings other than social or religious for a period of two years, and he also specifically instructed me to withdraw from a number of organisations, some of which I didn't belong to ! But it also included the Transvaal Peace Council to which I did belong. Now just about that time we'd organised an important public meeting in the <sup>Selborne</sup> Hall in Johannesburg on the question of the war in Korea. It was very important

because we had a most distinguished guest, that was the late D.N. Pritt. He had just come down <sup>to</sup> ~~from~~ Johannesburg <sup>from Kenya</sup> where he had been defending Jomo Kenyatta in that famous trial, and we prevailed upon him to address a public meeting on the Korean War under the auspices of the Transvaal Peace Council, which he did very eloquently indeed. I might say that Pritt's name was very well known in our country because ~~he~~ of his record, his books and his speeches, and I think we had only one advert. in the paper because we had no time for more, but it was sufficient to fill up this quite substantial Hall; we must have had about 600 people there. I went to this meeting, in spite of the Minister's banning, ~~and I sat at the back in a rain-coat~~, and after Pritt had given his speech, on a pre-arranged signal from the President, the Rev. Thompson, who said "We'll now have a vote of thanks from Mr. Harmel". And I walked up from the back of the Hall - it was a *memorable* moment in my life - I'd been sitting huddled up in a raincoat at the back and I walked up on to the platform, and I did receive a marvellous ovation: it was minutes before I could regain my composure, to be able to speak at all. Well, of course my job was to propose a vote of thanks to Mr. D.N. Pritt who had been so kind as to come, and that we knew all about him, and I was able to say many nice and well-deserved things about him, but I added a word of personal explanation. I told them about my banning orders, (~~I~~ knew there were detectives in the audience) and one of the orders confined me to Johannesburg, so I said "Well, that's not so bad really, nobody likes to be confined anywhere, but if I have to be confined to any area in the world I think I would prefer my home town - there's nowhere else I'd rather be !" Then I said about this banning me from the Peace Movement "I can't accept that, this is a matter of conscience - it's on everybody's mind - and there are some matters which are just too big to be overridden by a ministerial order and I just feel I can't keep out of the Peace Movement.

I was duly arrested, I think it was the next day: they didn't come up to me at the meeting, and ~~Bram~~ <sup>Bram Fischer</sup> ~~Fischer~~ and ~~Vernon~~ <sup>Vernon Betrange</sup> ~~Betränge~~ ~~(?)~~ another lawyer in Johannesburg, whisked me off in a car somewhere after the meeting. But of course I went home the next day and went to work, and I think it was probably the day after that I was arrested, and it appeared in all the papers. The defence was rather interesting: we had a not unsympathetic magistrate,

and I'd noticed that - ~~my lawyers said this was a rotten defence - but I'd~~  
~~noticed that~~ he'd quizzed the prosecution quite a bit about something. My  
banning order excluded social and religious gatherings, and he'd asked them  
what they understood by 'social'. "Oh well" the Prosecutor said "parties  
for instance". The Magistrate then said <sup>"Is that the only meaning of social?"</sup> - and I persuaded Vernon that this  
was a 'tip', a 'hint' and he came with dictionaries the next day. Of course  
it turned up in the dictionary 'social' meant something concerned with society !  
He knew it was a rotten defence, but the Magistrate jumped at it - he acquitted  
me ! He said "Yes, that's quite right, that's the dictionary definition."  
I think the old fellow on the Bench had mixed up germ-war with gas-war, because  
he also said "Some of us suffered from that sort of thing in the First World  
War." I was therefore free but I was still banned from the Peace Movement,  
and since one <sup>can't</sup> go around getting arrested every day I made my future participa-  
tion in the Movement rather more discreet; although I was elected, and so was  
I. <sup>Wolfson</sup> ~~Wilson~~, another man who was also banned and was also on the Peace Council,  
<sup>Is it Wolfson was</sup> ~~Izzy Wilson~~, a Trade Unionist. He was the Treasurer of the South African  
Trades and Labour Council at the time; both of us were banned; nevertheless  
in defiance <sup>as it were</sup> ~~of~~ the coming Congress of the Transvaal Peace Council elected both  
of us back on to the Executive. That was how people felt about it.

Well, what happened after that in the following years can be told by  
others: Mr. Szur, Hilda, Dr. Dadoo and Sonia could be more useful about later  
periods when my participation wasn't so central. I remember, very, very  
distinctly the Congress of the Transvaal Peace Council and all the events that  
led up to it. I remember the arguments that we used to have at one stage  
with a certain minority: for example, when we got out a leaflet we would insist  
that it shouldn't only be in English and Afrikaans which are the two official  
languages, but also in <sup>Sesotho</sup> ~~Sesutu~~ and Zulu and other African languages. And one  
section objected - in various forms - but it never did succeed, and I think  
the reason why our movement meant something in South Africa and wasn't just  
a little group of cranky people was because of our very firm link with the  
National Liberation Movement. Chief Lutuli and Walter Sisulu and Maulvi  
Cachalia and Dr. Dadoo, all these eminent people, in the National Liberation  
Movement, received our message most sympathetically: they realised - and we



constantly had to clarify this - this is not a pacifist movement, we're not saying we mustn't fight in South Africa with all the means we can use against the oppressors, it is a movement to stop the imperialist powers making war. And I think that was understood by the masses. If we'd just gone out shouting "Peace ! Peace ! Peace !" I think people would have turned their backs on us, and I think that gave us strength. It also meant that when the movement was persecuted throughout the '60s, ever since Sharpeville, the African National Congress after a legal existence since 1912 was declared an unlawful organisation, the progressive leaders of all these movements were arrested and <sup>detained</sup> ~~interned~~, some of them for peace work, but I should say most of them for participation in the National Liberation struggle in one form or another, so that all our militants were either banned or in prison - some were executed, and we can't forget those people, ~~and~~ <sup>if</sup> had we been as respectable as some people had wanted us to be we might have continued still. But I don't think it would have been worth while, it wouldn't have made an impact, I don't regret it. The spirit of the Peace Movement implanted an understanding of the international situation and its links with our own struggle for liberation in South Africa. That I don't think was a waste of time at all: I think it was immensely valuable. One doesn't count the strength of a movement by the numbers of people who join it or whether it's still permitted to exist in a fascist State like South Africa has become: its strength was in its impact on the masses, and I think it <sup>deepened their understanding and</sup> helped the international struggle for world peace.

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