

Eyewitness account

Smuggling revolutionary Marxist literature into apartheid South Africa

Support for the anti-apartheid struggle was a worldwide phenomenon, especially by the 1980s. At that time, the new South African trade unions were increasingly playing a dominant role in the struggle. Workers and their organisations across the world responded to this with class solidarity. Izwi reporters spoke to *Brian Blake*, a UK socialist, trade unionist and then *Militant* organiser about the significant risks that UK workers were prepared to take to help smuggle the ideas of revolutionary Marxism and socialism to the South African working class, ideas that argued for an international united working class struggle for socialism.

During the early 1980s I worked as a full time organiser for the *Militant*, now the Socialist Party, in the West London district. The district had established contact with a number of workers in industry who supported and sympathised with our ideas, when, in the 1980s, there was still a lot of light industry in London. We would regularly contact these sympathisers for support around a number of campaigns.

At this time I got to know a group of shop stewards who worked for British Airways (BA) on 'the ramp' at Heathrow Airport. The ramp was where the carriages that contained all of an aircraft's baggage were lined-up ready to be loaded on to the aircraft. The workers then took them to be loaded in the holds.

Militant

The Marxist paper for Labour and youth

1964 - 1997

During one visit to these stewards I sold them copies of *Inqaba Ya Basebenzi* and other political documents from our sister party in South Africa, the Marxist Workers Tendency [today WASP]. This led to a discussion on the apartheid regime and what workers from around the world could do to help defeat it. One of the stewards asked me how we got the documents into South Africa as they were then being printed in London, UK. I explained that it was very difficult. The stewards offered to put the documents into the baggage holds of aircraft flying to South Africa, not just the BA flights but the holds of the South African Airways flights as well.

After discussing this with the comrades of SALEP (Southern African Labour Education Project – established by the MWT to promote direct links between workers in SA and internationally) I started to take regular supplies of the documents to them at Heathrow. We got feedback from South Africa that it was successful when word that the black workers at the various SA airports were reading our material started to spread. This was repeated on a

regular basis with me visiting the stewards at Heathrow every time a new addition of *Inqaba* was produced.

We had to change our meeting place when BA started to get wind of what we were doing and increased security at the entrance to the ramp work site. We managed to carry on for a while longer until the UK police's Special Branch and the South African Bureau of State Security raided the workers mess room and staff areas. Luckily they found nothing and even though the workers were all subject to intense questioning they said nothing. After this we had to stop.

The ramp workers also made a very generous donation to the struggles of the South African miners. This was after a *Militant* mineworker activist was able to visit mineworkers in South Africa. Upon his return he toured UK workplaces to speak at meetings and inform the UK workers about the struggles of their South African brothers and sisters. He spoke to a meeting of about 100 trade union members and activists at Heathrow telling them the latest developments in the black workers' struggle against the apartheid regime.

