

REGGIE RADEBE: INTERVIEWED IN PIETERMARITZBURG, 18 SEPT 1992 BY
J.SEEKINGS

JS: I believe that when you were at Ngoye you were, besides being an SRC leader, at that point you were also a Youth Brigade stalwart?

RR: [LAUGHS] Yes, in fact, I joined Inkatha at the time it was called the National Liberation, National Inkatha Liberation Movement in 1976, whilst I was a high school student at Menza [?] High in Umlazi. And because, at that time, Inkatha was viewed by us as an organisation that could become a vehicle for liberation, especially for mobilising the masses in the rural areas and urban areas. And sort of get a mass movement that would challenge apartheid. And, well, Buthelezi was also quite critical of apartheid at that time. And then the following year, in 1977, I then went to the University of Zululand. I was still a member of Inkatha as a first-year student. I used to explain Inkatha policies and strategies to the other students of the university who were critical of Inkatha and of Buthelezi, in particular. I used to mix with the members of the Black Consciousness Movement, and I mean SASO still was unbanned at that time, I mean was still, yes unbanned. And right up to 1978, well what happened is that then, at the first conference of the Inkatha Youth Brigade, in February 1978, I was elected National Treasurer of the Youth Brigade. And then I got involved, you might say if you like, at a national level, although of course Inkatha wasn't as nationalist at the time, but we called it a national structure. And we, as the Youth Brigade, we were quite involved in this process of mobilising the masses, of conscientising the masses, and we felt also that some form of action had to be embarked upon by Inkatha as an organisation, sort of protest action. And I remember, at that time, we were saying within Inkatha that there are three stages of struggle: the first one is conscientisation, and secondly we said mobilisation, and then action. Now action, as we saw it, would then have various phases or stages. Like we would have an action programme. We would start with say protest, or prayer meetings, or whatever and if the regime doesn't respond in the meantime, you intensify your action. And we did not even rule out the possibility of resorting to arms, if all else failed. Now, it was precisely because of that, that we took that policy of Inkatha quite seriously in the Youth Brigade and therefore at the, what we called the Youth Camp, which was more of a camp, not for military training or whatever, but it was sort of more for political training, because we used to have it for the whole week. That was now in June 1978, we... It was at that time that we, as the Youth Brigade, and I was quite instrumental in arguing for a programme of action. And at that time what we had in mind was having something like a two day stayaway and see if people would respond to our call for it. If not, then we would regard that as mobilising action, or conscientising action and go to people to conscientise them, to really be ready for action, of peaceful action. But precisely because I and other comrades were advocating action we fell foul of Chief Buthelezi, who deliberately equated our clamour for action as an incitement to violence. For him, action meant violence, and I think it was such a deliberate goal on his part because he knew that our action was defined. We were saying clearly we wanted non-violent action. Because for us we said, if Inkatha pursues a policy of non-violence, non-violence is not synonymous with non-action. For instance, some of us at the time had read quite a lot of literature about the American struggle, the struggles of Martin Luther King and so on. We felt that Inkatha could embark on

such kind of actions as a peaceful demonstration against apartheid. But Buthelezi opposed that vehemently and violently, if you like. And I am not going to go into all the details around it because that in itself was a long story, but that then was how we fell foul of Buthelezi. And then at that point I came to realise that Buthelezi was not serious about liberation, although he was mouthing it all the time. And I had also discovered that he had such high respect for the SADF, and in fact at that youth camp he threatened us with the... He said the SADF was so powerful that nothing could be done against it or against... Which meant that in fact he was saying that nothing could be done against ... [?]. And what also frightened me was, when he said at that very meeting, way back in 1978, "We here in KwaZulu have a case for independence". He said "KwaZulu was a sovereign state and therefore we have a case for independence. And that unlike Transkei and other homelands, we are unique in that we have a case for independence". Now that frightened me. Oh, it did. How can I go along with a man, who I think is committed to a united, unitary South Africa, who is talking this language? And also it was very clear to me, that he was not only dictatorial within that organisation, not allowing other points of view. Like I had a one hour debate with him, and I can tell you, it did not help, because the man just ... [?] to respond. And after I felt that it was appropriate for me to resign.

JS: So when did you resign?

RR: At that meeting, there and then, in Ulundi. At Ulundi, right at Ulundi, in 1978.

JS: When in '78?

RR: In June, June 1978. The place where we were, it was just outside Ulundi, in Buthelezi's place actually called Mhlahatini. In one of the schools there. That's where we held the camp. And after this clash of ideas and views with him, I resigned there and then.

JS: Several other people resigned as well. Is that right?

RR: Yes, yes. The Secretary-General of Inkatha, Dr Sibusiso Bhengu resigned at the time.

JS: You had close contacts with him?

RR: Yes I had close contact with him. In fact, he was working at University of Zululand, where I was. But at that time he left for Geneva, he had just resigned from the University of Zululand.

JS: And other Inkatha Youth Brigade people?

RR: Oh yes, the others resigned. For instance the Secretary of the Youth Brigade resigned and later left the country. During that same year, he left the country.

JS: Where is he now?

RR: Well, he is currently in the United States. But he left and joined the PAC at one point, for some time. There were other prominent members who resigned, including, well interestingly the now well known Mbongeni Ngema, no, no, Mbongeni Khumalo who revealed all about Inkathagate scandal. Did you hear about that? You see that chap, he resigned with us at that time, but later, in the early 80s, I heard that he had returned to Inkatha, and now he has resigned again and was exposing all the corruption there.

JS: I know about this event in broad terms but you are the first person I have ever spoken to about it. Did you have any contact with ANC people at that point? Directly?

RR: No, no. At that point, I personally did not have any direct contact with the ANC people, except that, for instance, the Secretary-General, Sibusiso Bhengu, was in direct contact. In the sense that he used to go abroad and meet with people. In fact even when Inkatha was being formed, that had been discussed with the ANC abroad. And Sibusiso Bhengu was instrumental in that whole process. And so, in that sense, he was in direct contact. And we viewed, therefore, Inkatha, in our minds, really, as an ANC in disguise.

JS: In Umlazi, for example, several people who were in leading roles in Umlazi Residents Association, like David Gasa and George Sithole were ex-ANC people who clearly had ANC links. Did you have any contact with them in Umlazi?

RR: Yes, I did, yes. In that sense, yes, perhaps, the kind of contact that I had with them was not perhaps sort of underground, related to underground activities. But I had, you see, when David Gasa and George Sithole and others were involved, even when they formed the Umlazi Residents Association, I was a student in Umlazi school. Well, I was quite interested in what they were doing. And I knew Gasa personally because I was used to see a guy who was staying with him, and so I used to see him and he used to talk politics with us and so on. But other than that I wasn't directly involved in what they were doing because I was still too young for that. Except that when I was in high school, there was what was formed in Umlazi, what we called a youth, an Umlazi Youth Parliamentary Debating Society. Which had links with David Gasa and others, and I suppose it was a way of organising the youth in Umlazi. Now I got quite actively involved in that as a youth. I liked debating. So we used to debate political topics there. And, I remember for instance as way back as when I was in 1975, ja 1975, debating the whole question of apartheid, at the time they used to call it separate development, bantustans, and we rejected all those things out of hand, at that time. So I think it was a way of conscientising and organising the youth of Umlazi, because they drew us from various schools, and participated in discussions. And I did take part in some of those activities at that time. But it was not an overtly ANC activity, as it were. And at the time, of course, I personally didn't know, I was quite excited about getting the youth to discuss issues of importance and so on.

S: But I thought David Gasa was quite upfront about being pro-ANC. He didn't try and hide it very much.

RR: No, he didn't. Except that he... Well, you see, at that time it was not easy for anybody to say "I am ANC" just like that but they used to do certain things that clearly were sort of pro-ANC in a way. But it was very hard because around about that time you could not even utter the name Mandela. Inside the school, if you said Mandela, the teacher would shout you down, saying "Never mention that!". You say ANC, "No, no that's politics." There was such a repression. Even as students, we wanted to know more about all these things in class, and the teachers would say, "No, no, that's politics, you don't mention that at all". Now, it is true, yes, that in 1976 Winnie Mandela was unbanned for a while, and soon after that unbanning, that was part of her banning orders, David Gasa arranged that she come to Umlazi, and sort of drive right round the whole township. I remember that incident very well. It was in 1976, early 1976. And she came there, and she greeted people, she drove throughout, around the township. And later they had a meeting at YMCA, one of the halls there in town, the meeting was chaired by Mrs Fatima Meer, and David

Gasa was there and he also spoke. And Buthelezi, of course, criticised that meeting and complained about the fact that he had not been invited.

JS: Were you at that meeting?

RR: No, I wasn't at the meeting there, but I saw the whole, let's say convoy of cars, with Mrs Mandela in. And she released a speech of Mandela, the last speech that he made here in Pietermaritzburg before he was arrested. I read that speech for the first time in 1976. It had just been released by Mrs Mandela then.

JS: Well, I know that by 1985 you were a teacher in Imhali, but what did you do between 1978 and 1985?

RR: Oh yes, what then happened? What was happening? I said to you I resigned in 1976, 78, in June. Thereafter, of course, I was then harassed by the South African security police and so on. And later I discovered that Buthelezi had complained to them that I was doing things that were unofficial. And, in fact, he was making also claims that I was working in cahoots with organisations abroad and those kinds of allegations. Now, but then I carried on as a student at the University. In 1979, I was elected as President of the SRC for the term starting 1979 up to 1980. And then, all of us, I clashed with Buthelezi again during my term of office because the student body did not approve of Buthelezi's policies and also his chancellorship at the university. Now, which led then to my being assaulted during the graduation day of that year. And then later in the year the KwaZulu cabinet issued a circular to all circuit officers in KwaZulu and also to certain schools to the effect that I should not be employed as a teacher in any of their schools. And at the time I was completing my UED, and I had just applied to at least two schools. In fact, not just applied, I mean I had appointments with the principals of those schools, firstly Menza [?] High where I was a student. The principal wanted me to teach there. And another school in Ixopo where my home is. But simply because of this ban, I was unable to take up those posts. Which therefore meant I had to look for an alternative. And then I got employed by a private school, St Mary's Seminary which is a catholic school in Ixopo, from 1981. You remember I completed in 1980, and I started then teaching there in 1981. In 1981, 1982, 1983 I must say in terms of political involvement, it was relatively very low. I mean there was as such no structure that I belonged to, political above-board structure, especially right there in the rural area. But I was trying to organise. For instance in my home area we were organising the youth, just to get the youth together and to introduce politics to them gradually. But the emphasis was simply on unity of the youth and focus on social activities, and just those kind of things. But quite clearly, my agenda and the agenda of some people that I was working with was to also get them conscientised and get them involved in the liberation struggle. So it was sort of a low key thing at that time.

JS: My impression is that most of the youth groups at that time, for example the short lived African Youth Congress in KwaMashu, DCO Matiwane here in Pietermaritzburg, really their main concern was to essentially - to put it bluntly - to recruit people for MK. Was that your concern also?

RR: No, not primarily, at the time. You see my concern at that time was to, I mean it was really... There was a lull in political activity and in resistance to apartheid. Whether we did it somewhat above-board, literally, but some form of action. Which, obviously would also lead to the recruitment of people for MK, definitely, for those

people. Of course I had come to accept that there was no way at that time that the South African apartheid regime could simply be either overthrown or be forced to talk without the use of revolutionary violence. And so, in a sense, one was concerned about that, that in fact we needed to augment the army. But most of my activities at that time were simply just to try to get the youth conscientised; to keep the spirit going, their awareness. Because that was also lacking, to a very large extent. Because the only party here was really Inkatha, that had some presence in most parts of Natal and people were being fed with this Inkatha policy that I have now come to realise, that they were not going to do that anyway.

JS: Did you have any contact with people like Ben Dikobe or people in MALAYO in Lamontville? At that time?

RR: No, not with Ben Dikobe. You see, whilst I was there, I used to hear about them, but I was in Ixopo myself. Now, by the time I came to Maritzburg, Ben had just been picked up by the police.

JS: You came here in '84?

R: In '84, yes.

JS: Right. So before that you were organising sort of low key... But you didn't have contact with people doing other things, similar things elsewhere?

RR: No, I did. I mean like I had for instance contact with the Mxenges in Durban. You know the family that was gunned down? Well, I had contacts with Griffiths Mxenge. Well, I remember, you see, in 1980 at a time, more people when they came to Natal, even some journalists from abroad, I remember especially ... [?]; in Jo'burg, he was advised to speak to Mxenge in Durban, and to me in fact in southern Zululand [?]. Because at that time, many other people were not known. They didn't have the profile, other than the Inkatha people. So if you came to Natal really it was hardly... Who else can I speak to here? So Mxenge at least was known and some, because of my clashes with Inkatha and so on and my being President of the SRC I also became known, although I wasn't a leader, in those days. But I then established contacts with Griffiths Mxenge. But unfortunately he got gunned down in 81, but I maintained contact with his wife, Victoria. And Archie Gumede. I also had some contacts with him. We were all of the same mind and felt that something had to be done. And, in fact, Griffiths and I were quite the same in our ideas about organising people and forming structures and so on, I mean in a sense. Even using the press to get... I mean there was a paper that was established, called Ukuša, but that folded. And I had to recommend the editor, not the editor, but one of the key reporters was the best friend of mine who I had even appointed as editor for our newsletter at the University of Zululand, and because of that he wrote such a good editorial that Mxenge and them were impressed. So we got this guy. That was Protest Mdladla. Do you know him? Protest Mdladla. Protest Mdladla, he's usually regarded as one of the first of the mixed marriages in South Africa. Do you remember in 1985?

JS: Where is he now?

RR: He is in Durban, the University of Natal. But you see somehow one was involved but I also had contact with people like Gwenza Mlaba and others. I mean it is not as if I was lonely as it were. Like for instance, when the UDF was formed, I was approached. There was an organisation over there that was affiliated to UDF in Ixopo, by people like Mlaba and them. But primarily I was really doing teaching.

JS: Were you at all involved or were you aware of the Maluti Project? In 1981? Maluti?

RR: No, no. I was not aware.

JS: Do you know about it since?

RR: Yes, slightly but not quite...

JS: So in '83, or at the beginning of the '84 year, you went to Imbali?

RR: Yes, that's right.

JS: And you were working in Imbali?

RR: Ja.

JS: How come you got a job in a school in Imbali?

RR: That's quite interesting. I was again approached by the principal of that school, ... [?]. He had known me at the University of Zululand. At the time he was Chief of Hostels, they used to call it there, in Ulundi. And I think he so much wanted me to come to his school, and also people like Thami Msuleke, he was already teaching there. And they wanted me to come over there and to become vice-principal of the school. And, finally... I first turned down the offer, but after a lot of persuasion, I agreed. The inspector, there was a certain inspector there, also Radebe, and Buthelezi [?], then they came down through some ... [?] to persuade me to come over there and pick up this post of vice-principal. And then finally I agreed and then took it up. And the reason why, because Imbali falls under the DET so the schools there are under the DET. No, not KwaZulu.

JS: No, I didn't realise that.

RR: You didn't realise that? No, there was no way I could teach in KwaZulu schools.

JS: Now when you arrived in Imbali, at the beginning of 1984, what was your impression of the state of organisation or conscientisation of the youth in Imbali and in Pietermaritzburg in general?

RR: Well I would say in general it was very low. There had just been the DCO Matiwane Youth League. But at the time I arrived here it was beginning to crumble because of the detentions of Ben and others. And some of the comrades who were there were really treading very cautiously as it were. But then in Sobantu there was what was known as the Sobantu Youth Organisation, SOYO, which had waged some struggle, been struggling since 1983, which actually resulted in the death of a comrade there. And Sobantu was known to be quite a militant area, so to speak. There's this thing, apartheid and so on, the council system, they had resisted it since 1983. But then they had in place what was called the Committee of Twelve, which at that time wasn't really as involved in galvanising the people or continuously mobilising the people. It just became a committee, it operated as a committee without creating necessary structures for report-backs or mandates. In Imbali itself there really was a state of lull. I taught, this was at ... [?] High School, by and large the students were not really politicised, except a few who were very keen. And at that time, those were very keen on politics and that, who were also quite intelligent and wanted to engage in discussions and political debate, who just happened to be adherents of black consciousness, they were members of AZAPO and so forth. And well they... Then the UDF somehow began to mobilise the youth. Immediately then I think somehow right in 1984, we had the emergence of COSAS in the schools. In our school COSAS became fairly strong and in the township itself the youth were mobilised into the Imbali Youth Organisation under the leadership of Skhumbuzo Ngwenya. Skhumbuzo was the president of ... [?]. And so you really had, for

instance, i remember very well, you had IYO and sometimes also COSAS coming to the church say on Sunday in some venue in one of the churches there. They would meet and have discussions, political discussions and then just toyi-toying. But you know it was just sort of a handful of people there with this kind of politicisation. Until, really what sparked off things there, was the Koornhof visit to Imbali. I'm sure you recall when it was... I don't know exactly when, but it was towards the end of 1984. When Koornhof, it was announced that he was coming to install the councillors and we, as teachers, in fact, had been asked, had been ordered by the inspector to be there and also to ensure that our students went there and provided some guard of honour for Koornhof. And I think we made it clear to the inspector that there was no way that would happen because we knew our students were generally opposed to the council system and if we did so then we really should be inviting trouble. And already COSAS and IYO organised something, some demonstration against Koornhof. So that then on the very first day, on that day when Koornhof was supposed to be coming, we just did not have school. During the morning assembly the students decided to disperse and go to the streets. And so all the students in Imbali, from all schools, they just marched or rather they demonstrated. But, of course, they were tear gassed and so on and so on. There were clashes during that day, between the demonstrators and the police. So the people who were actually responsible for the protest, it was COSAS and IYO, and so then almost everybody else joined. So the whole event was really a disaster. Now, that conscientised people a lot in Imhali, because in the sense that... And it strengthened IYO and COSAS as well. Then, the other struggle immediately after that one, that was in 1985, at the beginning of 1985, the whole struggle around text books, SRCs and so on, those demands against corporal punishment. Now the students, under COSAS took up that struggle, and really brought things to a halt at the time. For two weeks there was no schooling at the beginning of the year. The whole community of Imhali supported that struggle. Out of it emerged a delegation, consisting of old people and younger people. And also it was at that time that it was felt that the old people had to be organised themselves. And then there was formed what was known as the Imbali Civic Association under the chairpersonship of Duma, Comrade Robert Duma.

JS: Right. It seems to me that there are a number of things which are very strange about Pietermaritzburg and even Natal as a region, in contrast to other regions. I would like to ask your views about them. Firstly, considering the youth in Pietermaritzburg and Durhan, with the exception of Lamontville, maybe the exception of Ixopo, I don't know, but certainly except for Lamontville, the youth in the regions seemed to have, when they were were organised in the early 1980s have seen action very much in terms of MK, armed struggle. There were very few other examples of youth getting involved, for example, in civic issues or other non-violent action. A lot of people had mobilised...

RR: Yes, that's right.

JS: ... had lots of people coming out shortly afterwards, a lot of them leave the country to join MK. A very regular feature. Compare this region with other regions. In other regions a lot of youth get involved in civic work, or civic-type related work. It doesn't happen so much in this region. There seems to be a concern with MK and the armed struggle. Why is that, do you think?

RR: Well, I am not so sure that you can generalise it like that. But I accept that what you are saying, I think is perhaps partially true. But I suppose, if you start with Sobantu, when the community there and the youth embarked on peaceful action in 1983, they were met with brute force by the regime, it was brute force. Now they saw there Hadebe, that chap being killed, and I think that, in fact, made the youth conclude that you had to meet force with force. And the kind of, I think the kind of brutality that was being meted out there to the young people, has led them to make that choice of, generally, of armed struggle. I remember, for instance, even as I was a teacher then, I, myself had really concluded because of the kind of brutality meted out to people that really, really really you need MK. You needed to fight this thing back. I mean even the extent to which the state was supporting Inkatha, for instance, so openly, supplying them with arms, and those kinds of things. The first warlords actually got their money from there. All these things, you know. I mean you find in Inkatha houses, people, you see the police there, shooting at people or allowing these people to shoot in broad daylight. And then you come to a conclusion that you can only match that with force, obviously.

JS: Did you have much contact with Lamontville? MALAYO? People like Lechesa and so on?

RR: Yes, later yes, when I was active in the UDF, yes, I had contact with Lechesa.

JS: With Lechesa, not earlier, not prior to 1985?

RR: No, not Lechesa as such, but you see I had contact with other people like Mcebisi Xundu from Lamontville and some other youth there. In the '83/84 period.

JS: The other striking thing about what you said, is that you mentioned there that people you had contact with and you mentioned people involved in the Charterist network in the region: Griffiths Mxenge, Victoria Mxenge, Mlaba, Archie and so on. But you haven't mentioned, of course, any of the Indian activists, or for example people involved in the Committee of Concern, here in Pietermaritzburg in 1984. There appears to be a bit of a gulf between the kind of world that you were operating in and the world of the NIC, that group in the UDF, and the Committee of Concern in Pietermaritzburg.

RR: Yeah, no, I can see your point. No, I think if we talk about me personally, that can be explained. You see when I came to Maritzburg in 1984, I was primarily a teacher, right? And, in a sense, there was no structure to which I could belong. You see the UDF, you had to have either a civic association or a teacher organisation or something like that. But you see there were already these youth structures emerging that were affiliated to UDF, and student organisations. And, you see, then of course, there were these ideological differences or discussions between Black Consciousness adherents and Charterists, especially in my school. And I had a lot of contact with Black Consciousness people, most of them were my students, and my friends as well. But I was not there for practically involved in any of the structures, in 1984 then, because there wasn't any structure, but I was always concerned. And I felt that maybe we should organise the teachers and have the teachers organisation that would then affiliate with the UDF and so on. Of course, we were also concerned at the time that there were people who were sceptical, for instance, of white involvement in the struggle. You see, if you haven't worked in a non-racial set-up it is quite a shocking experience to sit next to a white person and learn strategy for bringing about the government, down the government.

or talk liberation. Because, you see, at the time, especially those of us who had some influence, some Black Consciousness influence, and also some Africanist kind of influence. So that then I was also concerned about the fact that... I knew that there was NEUSA although it was a bit out of touch. I mean people were not really... It was removed from the, especially African teachers administration, it was a bit removed. I knew that it was an affiliate of the UDF but I thought if you want to organise teachers, what would be the first thing to do, was it just to say, okay, here is NEUSA, you bring to them and then there is a non-racial organisation. Some of the old teachers might just think we were clowning, some might because of their Black Consciousness beliefs might reject it, and then our teacher organisation gets divided. But you see we then somehow waged the struggle within the education sector itself without any, without waging it under the umbrella of any organisation. In '85, for instance, we ourselves as teachers waged struggles. I remember in August after the assassination of ... [?], there was a three week boycott of schools, all schools in Pietermaritzburg. And we succeeded in getting the teachers involved and condemning the State of Emergency, apartheid, assassinations and all those kinds of things, and to support the student demands. But we sort of did it as other teachers, concerned teachers. But we felt further, what was then necessary was to get the organisation going at a time when we were thinking of forming something like a teachers' action committee or whatever, Skhumbuzo Ngwenya and others came to us and discussed contact with NEUSA, because it was already an affiliate of the UDF, although it was very weak in the African areas. It virtually had no membership, or those members it was those teachers who were not committed in the struggle as such but who were just joining it so that they could get some assistance from white teachers with their studies and things, but not people who were, who had political agenda, like we had. So that when certain white teachers came to us in Imbali...

[END OF TAPE]

[THE INTERVIEW CONTINUED FOR ABOUT FIVE MINUTES, UNRECORDED. RR was recruited into NEUSA after UNP's Gultig and Hart visited Imbali; RR was elected Imbali NEUSA chairperson, and was formally drawn into the UDF, where he had his first formal contact with Indian activists. RR discussed his Africanist views, which he saw as practical and pro-UDF, in contrast to AZAPO (who unsuccessfully tried to recruit him in 1984). RR had been a founder-member of AZASO, but left it before it became Charterist. RR pointed to the gap in African leadership between the 1950s and the late 1970s; some people had gone into Inkatha, but most did nothing. The gap was compounded by the 'stifling' grip of NIC etc on resources; this held back the development of African leadership.]