

## Ronnie Press 28/08/1929 – 28/10/2009

Ronnie Press was a tireless, principled and courageous fighter against apartheid. He was a member of Bristol ACTSA and its Executive Committee but he was much much more.

Ronnie was born in 1929 in South Africa. His father was a cinematographer and trade unionist and his mother a shorthand typist with the Trades and Labour Council. He studied Chemical Engineering at Wits University and completed his doctorate.



During those latter studies, he discovered a shelf of 'banned books' on Marx, Lenin and Engels in the basement library and became hooked. Shortly after he joined the Congress of Democrats, and then the ANC, and South African Communist Party. He was at the founding meeting of the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) and later became General Secretary of the Textile Workers Industrial Union. Ronnie was also a founding member of MK.

During the run up to the Congress of the People in 1955, Ronnie was asked by the ANC to address a meeting where people could express what they wanted to be in the Freedom Charter. At the meeting he was arrested by the Special Branch and taken to the local police station. After a wait of several hours he was informed by the guards that his lawyer had arrived. In walked Nelson Mandela!"

In 1956 Ronnie was one of the 156 people arrested in the Treason Trial which limped on for a number of years when all defendants were acquitted. During the trial he married Sibyl. They celebrated in a joint wedding reception with Oliver and Adelaide Tambo. Following the Sharpeville Massacre in 1960 he was rearrested and imprisoned during the State of Emergency. That same year Ronnie and Sibyl's daughter, Estelle, was born. The banning of the ANC and SACP made political life difficult for anyone with a family. There was the added pressure that Sibyl was unwell and so in 1962 Ronnie and his family went into exile. It would be 30 years before he returned to South Africa.

In exile Ronnie continued working for the liberation movement as the family moved to London, Ghana and then Bristol. Arriving here in 1965 he was employed at Brunel Technical College on Ashley Down where they found a house and stayed for the next 22 years. Ronnie joined the Bristol Anti-Apartheid Movement group, being active here and with the ANC and SACTU in London. As with many activists he juggled family life and work with trade union activities, Communist Party meetings and numerous other actions. However, he was also providing 'technical support' for the ANC, MK and SACTU. Ronnie travelled widely on behalf of the movement and in the 1980s was a key player in Operation Vula.

After retirement from Brunel, Ronnie moved to London to work full time for SACTU and then returned to Bristol following the death of Sybil and the first democratic elections in South Africa. He had been back to South Africa once the ANC and SACP were unbanned but decided against staying there. Active in ACTSA, Ronnie also continued campaigning for causes dear to his heart including anti-racism, the cause of the Palestinians, and the environment.

He had always written political and academic tracts but now he turned to poetry and other musings. At many ACTSA meetings the first things he did was hand out a poem he had just written. He also produced paintings, wood carvings, marquetry and other crafts with almost the same passion he had for politics. He could always be relied upon to produce a raffle prize to raise funds at any meeting.

Ronnie had had health problems for a long time. He suffered from angina from the early 80s and in the late 90s had a heart bypass. Over the past couple of years he was in and out of hospital suffering chest pains without the medical staff really being able to get to the bottom of the problem. He died in the BRI.

In the dedication to his book, '*To Change the World! Is Reason Enough?*', Ronnie wrote, "Ilya Ehrenberg said that he was proud to be a Jew because of those thousands of Jews who died fighting the Nazis. I am proud to be a white South African because of those of us who fought Apartheid."

Ronnie could be proud of the life he lived. Although he had rubbed shoulders with people most of us had only read about, he was never pretentious or thought his opinion carried more weight. In many ways he preferred to be behind the scenes and had to be persuaded to talk about his experiences. However, he had a steely determination and was never afraid to put his head above the parapet. Someone called him a robust political fighter. He was also sharp. Whenever an issue was being discussed Ronnie would always want to know how any actions or campaigns fitted with the aims of the organisation and what it meant for the people of South and Southern Africa. He challenged us individually and as an organisation to think and to act.

He was generous with his time, creative and could be funny. He didn't praise easily but then he never expected it back either. He said that he never remembered names but he would always enquire about people. He would be embarrassed to know that people cared about him and will miss him.

Ronnie was proud of what the fight against apartheid had achieved and what the ANC government had done. However, he also recognised the limitations of some of those achievements. As well as fighting to overthrow the apartheid regime he was fighting for socialism and he knew that hadn't been achieved. He remained concerned that the poor and dispossessed were, in many ways, still that. Ronnie believed that the peoples of South Africa and the Region could achieve economic as well as political freedom and that it was our job to support them in that struggle in the same way that we had supported the fight against apartheid. He leaves us with that challenge.

**Hamba Kahle Ronnie.**