

## ECC 25 Years On: Some Views From Across the Shore

*By Matt Meyer, late October 2009, NYC*

It was July 1984, and a central question about the significance of Africa in my life and studies had already been answered. After four years of undergraduate work at New York University's Greenwich Village campus, I had barely recovered from academic probation due to my political activism as a public draft registration resister, and had patched together a degree which—given NYU's limited offerings and world vision—could only be called “Non-European History.” Travel to Mozambique and Zimbabwe with some Quakers who shared basic principles with my own comrades in the War Resisters League (WRL) confirmed my commitment to contemporary African studies. My weeks as a guest of the Organization of Mozambican Women, even in that Nkomati period—confirmed my passion for the continuing struggle.

On a tired evening towards the end of that Quaker-sponsored trip, in a suburb of Harare during what had to have been at least the hundredth interview we had conducted, we were listening to another American, Julie Frederikse. She had recently written *None But Ourselves*, an important book on the role of the media in the Chimurenga war of independence, and I don't remember placing any significance to my clothing choice of the evening. But apparently my tee-shirt, with the words War Resisters League written across the top and a broken rifle largely displayed across the middle, made an impression upon our interviewee. Julie approached me after the talk, which I do remember being very quite at, and asked if it was just or shirt, or was I active in resistance politics back at home? It was more than an academic question, you see. Her husband, Stelios Comminos, was a South African conscientious objector who had felt a need to leave the country, and it just so happened that he was hosting a few young men from his home that she was certain would like to meet me once I confirmed that I was, in fact, active with the WRL.

So it was that I began to have a front row, ring side seat in the earliest formations of the End Conscription Campaign. Coming home after the Harare meeting that followed, my plate was filled with work to be done. I had sat with folks my own age and (more or less) my ethnicity, excited about the news of both the individual realities of increased numbers of objectors and the collective potential for building a movement that would contribute something unique to the broader efforts against apartheid. There was much to report about the conditions in Mozambique and Zimbabwe, but to my own constituents in the WRL there was a story closer to home. We had already been supportive of fellow pacifist objectors, like Richard Steele of the Fellowship of Reconciliation. But here was an opportunity for a significant strategy to be put to the test: secular resisters would risk jail time in the context of building a larger movement—making the connections to what Martin Luther King had called the “twin evils” of racism and militarism. The connections between what many of us in the States were trying to do, in an extraordinarily different situation, were nonetheless striking.

I wrote to the addresses I was given, sending posters and stickers and notes of support, and received some quick replies. A chap named Laurie Nathan had put together a packet

of similar swill—programs of a recently held festival, and press releases and clippings, and kind words relaying how much our support had meant. By 1985, I had become the National Chairperson of WRL, the youngest in their 70+ year history, and a number of us were eager to have the National Organizer and others in this ECC speak for themselves. “I’ve written an article which I hope isn’t too long, and are very keen to send you stories about ECC and the SADF in the future.” Laurie saw fit to clue us in on the strange places we seemed to be getting mail from: “Please ignore the Zoology address at the back of the envelope—I was just trying to keep prying eyes and hands away from the package.”

It is hard now to imagine or remember the difficulty in getting information out in the age before the internet, when repressive regimes like South Africa under apartheid could more easily cloak news from one point to the next. An additional complication of special concern in the U.S.A. was the sometimes dogmatic application of boycott rules amongst representatives of the liberations movements. With both the ANC and PAC having special status at the United Nations Headquarters, it was important to be clear to all concerned parties that we were acting not simply for some limited agenda giving voice to a single white conscript. With WRL’s own national office in New York, we needed to be consistent in our commitment to the eradication of apartheid and all forms of racism.

It was no small responsibility, however, to get the word out widely when we received letters such as one dated 18 September 1985:

“The ‘Troops Out of the Townships’ campaign started yesterday in all our regions,” wrote Laurie. “Hopefully you will have already received information about it a few weeks ago. If you did, you would be aware that the highlights of the campaign are a mass 24 hour fast from October 6 to 7, and a three week fast by a few members of ECC. We would welcome groups or prominent individuals in other countries fasting on the 7<sup>th</sup> or at any other time during the campaign. . .

“You have probably also heard by now that ECC has just experienced a wave of state harassment. Last Monday, the homes of ECC people in Joburg and Pietermaritzburg were raided by security police. Simultaneously, in Cape Town and Durban, 4 ECC members were detained. All the detainees have been held under Section 29 of the Internal Security Act which provides for indefinite detention and denies the detainees access to his/her family, lawyer, doctor, etc. Last night the police came looking for me at several ECC houses, and I am now going to have to be a whole lot more discreet.

“ECC as a whole has not been shaken by this intimidation and is more determined than ever to make the campaign a success. There is a positive sense of having to do it because of, not despite, the detentions.”

Laurie and I, with the help of War Resisters International staff person Howard Clark and countless others, began a plan to get leading ECC members out of the country to tour Europe, Asia, and the Americas. As it was decidedly more difficult for activists in South Africa’s own African and Asia communities to travel internationally and return home unmolested, these tours often served as amongst the only means of

spreading information about what was happening on the ground in UDF and other vital circles. The ECC tours were key, not just for informing the burgeoning anti-apartheid movement but also for inspiring sectors of the global peace movement abroad which had not yet joined the divestment or solidarity band wagons. The first of these excursions saw Gavin Evans provide testimony to the U.N. Special Committee Against Apartheid, a space that made public the designs and possibilities for this new initiative. If successful, the ECC could provide a wedge within the very heart of the structures that upheld apartheid: the whites-only Defense Forces. For what personal or political reasons, the conscripts could stick a gear into the racist military machine.

Neither time nor memory (or at attempt to protect us from our youthful indiscretions) allow for detailed reminiscences of all the overseas tours. I shall, therefore, only provide a selective series of snapshots:

- explaining jacket-and-tied Gavin to the Black nationalist student activists at Columbia University, who were not too pleased at the way he skirted questions of ECC's relationship to the leadership of the national liberation struggle;
- traveling by bus on Christmas Eve with Laurie and Pete Hathorn, to the home of Catholic Institute director Ian Linden in Bath, England. We wondered how two nice Jewish boys would properly celebrate the birth of the savior with (like the little drummer boy) no gifts to bring—especially after the nice bottle of South African red wine brought for the occasion had been thoroughly smashed on our mad rush to not miss the last bus out of London;
- running around central India, Laurie and Pete telling all who noticed a strange accent that they were radical Zimbabweans, and noting—at the New Year's Eve celebration held at Gandhi's Ashram at the conference sponsored by WRI—how well the two of them, joined by a representative of the South African Council of Churches and the Black Sash, sang Nkosi Sikeleli (not missing a word of the banned song!);
- experiencing the joys of international "affairs," the consummated ones of which shall remain undisclosed at this time . . . however, no true telling of the ECC world phenomenon would be complete without a reference to the obvious attraction one Bayard Rustin found at the same India conference for the marvelous young boys of the Campaign. Rustin, an icon of the U.S. civil rights movement and unapologetic gay activist, helped channel many foundation grants to ECC (and Laurie and I got to attend his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday party at the Waldorf Astoria).

Is it significant that a conference we presented at in Helsinki, Finland, hosted by WRI and the International Peace Bureau, resulted in one of the first international books—*Youth and Conscription*—to cover the work of ECC? What of the subsequent conferences, traveling by boat to a demilitarized island off the coast of Sweden with Adele Kirsten, or discussing the role of the church with Anita Kromberg and Sue Britton in Belgium, as they introduced us to Nonzizwe Madlala Routledge and

Sandile Thusi? Sandile was a detainee on hunger strike when the decision had been made that one way to creatively work within the narrower confines of the State of Emergency would be to have a tour-in-reverse. Three activists from the U.S. and Europe, including African American Vietnam veteran Greg Payton, were toured around South Africa, helping to raise awareness of C.O. conditions in other parts while also serving to reconnect the networks that were driven slightly under by the SOE repression. Greg and Sandile remained close up till the time of Thusi's death some years ago.

Surely no ECC anniversary celebration could be complete without some moments to reflect on those no longer with us. I have so many vivid recollections, for example, of wonderful times with Ivan Toms. Toms was a true iconoclast, willing to break stereotypes and assumptions, always with a bright smile. Being a doctor in the middle of Crossroads, like becoming a C.O., were easy and obvious choices. But when the CIA-influenced U.S. Agency for International Development decided to fund the trips of several South African medical leaders to the land of the free and home of the brave, Ivan was not one to shirk an opportunity. He went along with the USAID trip, filling in whatever blank spaces existed with sharp critiques of both apartheid and U.S. interventionism (this during Ronald Reagan's attacks on Nicaragua under the leadership of socialist Daniel Ortega).

Ivan made what little time was left in his tight schedule available for discussions with divestment activists here, but also planned with me a side trip before returning to Cape Town. If the U.S. government was going to foot the bill to get him all the way over to the New World, surely he could spend a little of his own money to hop on a plane to Managua to check out the revolutionary experiments taking place in Central America! When Toms returned to New York to connect with his flight home, he proudly informed any news source that would listen: "I AM A Sandintista!" One could imagine that neither the U.S. nor the South African governments were particularly pleased with this pronouncement.

Another memory of those who have passed on comes from my first trip to South Africa in 1992. After hearing that one must never travel to the land of apartheid for my entire adult life, it was hard to imagine making this trip, even with the movements now un-banned. Furthermore, I was traveling with Pan African elder Bill Sutherland, a friend of Desmond Tutu and Oliver Tambos and a colleague of Zwelakhe Sisulus when they were both fellows at Harvard University. Sutherland and I were conducting interviews for book *Guns and Gandhi in Africa: Pan African Insights on Nonviolence, Armed Struggle, and Liberation*, and the word from on high was that it was more than OK for us to make the visit, despite the fact that apartheid was not formally over. We were cautious but thrilled to introduce our generations of friends to one another, and to meet new comrades, such as during our visit to the humble abode of Archie Gumede. It is especially hard to forget the day the two of us were brought to ANC headquarters for a lengthy dialogue with Walter Sisulu, then introduced to the entire assembled grouping of the ANC executive committee—Joe Slovo, Cyril Ramaphosa, so many more . . . and finally President Nelson Mandela. Madiba may

have only been president of the ANC and not the nation at that time, but it mattered little in those hallowed halls.

Nevertheless, equally strong in my memory is what Bill and I did following that momentous day of meetings. We returned for dinner to the simple house we were staying at: the warm home of Nan Cross. Nan had been a founder of ECC and a stalwart of the C.O. Support Group, but was now working with David Bruce and others to figure out how to keep things going in the ever-changing times she was faced with. Her simple but dedicated life, and quiet but determined position—to maintain a vigilant commitment to peace with justice whatever the era—was and is an inspiration for the long haul.

The years drift swiftly forward, with graying beards and less hair on top. Laurie and I now more often communicate as academics, trading chapters on what forms of conflict resolution might actually work in preventing future wars. Our flights across the oceans at least seem less frequent, and Facebook has taken the place of scribbled notes or listened-in-on long distance phone calls. The C.O.s of Israel and resisters of Palestine are more in need of our urgent support than many on the African continent. But the troubles in your home and in mine are really just as urgent as they were back then. They have certainly taken on different forms, and require the creativity of new generations. Perhaps some of what you all taught us all those years ago will still resonate in the building of new movements, and some of what we provided for you will serve as examples of what is to be done. So it's nice to raise a glass and shout "L'chaim!—To Life!" And also to remember: A Luta Continua.

