



**WALTER SISULU**







# **WALTER MAX ULYATE SISULU**



Leader of the African National Congress  
and  
Man of the People

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Walter Sisulu talking with Nelson Mandela, Prison Yard, Robben Island, 1966









Walter Sisulu addressing a rally in Alexandra Township, Johannesburg, on Human Rights Day, 10 December 1952



In the long history of the African National Congress of South Africa (ANC) since it was founded in 1912, many outstanding men and women have played a part both at leadership and rank and file level. It gathered behind its banner not only the chiefs and professional men irked by the theft of land and the restraints of segregation and discrimination, but the unlettered and often illiterate common people who sought in the ANC an instrument of deliverance from the poverty and pain to which they were subjected by the exploitation and oppression imposed by white domination. Like the tribe itself, the sum was greater than its parts, the President-General the mouthpiece, not the master, of its members.

Many of the men and women whose dedication and commitment made possible not only the Congress of the People and the Freedom Charter of 1955, but also the creation of the fighting army of the people, Umkhonto we Sizwe, which is ever more effectively challenging the might of the racist state, are today in prison. The name of Nelson Mandela is known and honoured worldwide, a symbol of the people's cause, as dignified and potent in adversity as he was when active on the open political battlefield. And with him serving life sentences in apartheid prisons are many other leaders of the liberation movement whose names may not all be as widely known but whose dedication, courage and commitment deserve respect.

Among those is Walter Sisulu, who was at the centre of ANC affairs from the 1940s until his arrest at Rivonia in 1963, who was the main defence witness in the Rivonia trial and who still stands where he always stood, solid as a rock in support of his people's cause, waiting only for the

prison gates to be opened so that he can resume the work of agitation, mobilisation and organisation at which he was pre-eminent. It was Walter Sisulu, in fact, who acted as guide and mentor to Nelson Mandela when he first came to Johannesburg, who worked with Mandela, Oliver Tambo and others in the African National Congress Youth League whose revitalising ideas began the conversion of the ANC from a 'moderate' organisation into the militant revolutionary force it is today. It was recognition of his personal worth and solidity which won Walter Sisulu the position of secretary-general of the ANC at its 1949 Congress where the 'Programme of Action' was adopted. It was Walter Sisulu who was the organising genius of the mighty upsurge of the people in the 1950s, who held everybody together through the Defiance Campaign, the Congress of the People, the Treason Trial, the strikes and boycotts, the stresses and conflicts of the late 1950s. He it was who guided the ANC into the underground after the banning of 1960 and laid the foundation for the shift to active self-defence against the violence of the state which gave birth to Umkhonto we Sizwe.

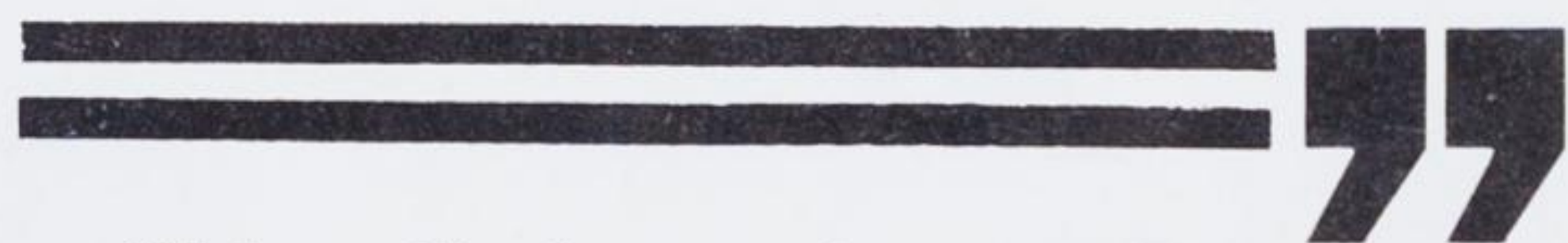
One of those who was close to him throughout this period wrote:

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‘Walter Sisulu was not a man for the public occasion, though he could rise to any. He was the man who made the public occasions possible, who behind the scenes had carried the burden of the organisation's work. If it was his earnest attention to detail, his patient persistence which carried the Congress and its campaigns through the country, Walter Sisulu had other, rarer qualities too. He had the



capacity to concentrate on the principal issues; by his own example of seriousness and dedication he had the ability to persuade those with doubts and those with differences that these should at no cost be allowed to prevail over the central objectives of the struggle. Walter Sisulu did not command; he persuaded. His personal behaviour, free of malice and self-seeking, reinforced his political clarity. He was a revolutionary because he understood fearlessly the failure of the society in which he lived to produce any alternative life for his people. He was also a revolutionary because he valued and loved people; he despaired of any change except by the masses, and he lived in the hope and confidence that they would rise to the challenge. As he undoubtedly still does.'



Walter Sisulu was born at Engcobo in the Transkei on 18 May 1912. He was brought up by his mother and an uncle, a village headman, according to the strict traditions of his people. Coming from a poor family, he was unable to proceed far with his formal education, having to leave school at the age of 15 in Standard 4 in order to look after family affairs when his uncle died. Walter's elders were devout Anglicans who tried to instil in him a respect for whites, missionaries and officials, but he found himself incapable of servility or submission and earned the warning from one of his teachers that if he did not change his ways when he grew up he would not be *allowed* to work for a white man. But work he had to, seeking on the Johannesburg goldmines the livelihood the impoverished Transkei was unable to provide. He worked at the rock face thousands of feet underground,

sleeping at night on the wooden bunks side by side with the other miners in the soulless compounds typical of the Reef. It was a hard life, devoid of any form of social contact, and when he had completed his contract he did not return, but sought work in East London as a 'kitchen boy', working for a white family, which gave him his first insight into the way of life of the dominant minority. This job did not last long either, and soon he was back in Johannesburg, this time working in a bakery for 18 shillings a week.

In his spare time he sometimes attended meetings of the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (ICU) and was fascinated by the fiery speeches of its leader, Clements Kadalie, but did not join the organisation. He learnt his first political lesson from life itself when he led the workers in the bakery out on strike for higher wages. After interviewing all the workers separately and persuading them to continue working at the old wage, the boss sacked Sisulu as the 'agitator'.

Sisulu then went on the usual round of jobs open to unskilled and untrained workers, finding employment with a succession of white employers whose general behaviour and demeanour fired his national spirit. He made a study of Xhosa history and wrote a series of articles about national heroes for the *Bantu World*, a white-owned paper directed towards an African readership. The streak of personal rebellion and resistance to white domination grew steadily stronger. One evening in the train going home to the township where he lived he saw a white ticket collector confiscating an African child's season ticket. He asked the official why he had done this but, instead of getting an answer, became the victim of an assault. Sisulu fought back,



was arrested and imprisoned. It was his first prison experience.

As he went from job to job he studied for his Junior Certificate and also took part in music and debating clubs. He was one of the first Africans to enrol at the Technical College when it was opened to blacks. By this time his mother had come from the Transkei to join him, and they lived in one of the small brick box houses in Orlando township, now part of Soweto. His mother supplemented the family income by taking in washing for white families.

Sisulu continued his quest for a political outlet and joined the ANC in 1940 after hearing a speech by Dr A B Xuma, who became president of the ANC in December of that year. The fact that Dr Xuma and Walter Sisulu shared a common birthplace may have helped to give Sisulu a feeling that he had found his political home. However, Sisulu became increasingly critical of Dr Xuma's 'moderation'.

Sisulu was now working as an estate agent, winning a sort of independence for himself by buying and selling the bits of freehold land that were still left to a handful of Africans under the country's land laws reserving 87 per cent of the country for white ownership and occupation. But his interest in the political world grew steadily, in the end to become a consuming passion. He was at first active in the ANC Youth League, working with Anton Lembede, Oliver Tambo, Govan Mbeki, Nelson Mandela and others. Sisulu was elected to the Youth League at its first meeting at the Bantu Men's Social Centre.

It was in Sisulu's office that the Youth Leaguers met to discuss their strategy and tactics, young men and women determined to bring about a radical change in South

African society during their lifetime. One of those who took part in the discussions, Albertina, a nurse, married Sisulu in 1944. At the wedding, Mandela was best man and Lembede, in a speech congratulating the bride, warned her: 'You are marrying a man who is already married to the nation.'

The enthusiasm and policies of the Youth Leaguers swept through the ANC like a hurricane, and were given relevance and immediacy by the victory of Malan's Nationalist Party in the 1948 general elections.

As one by one the ruthless apartheid laws were placed on the statute book, the African people began to realise that the old methods of conciliation and compromise pursued by the ANC leadership were no longer adequate. At the 1949 annual conference of the ANC a new and radical Programme of Action, which had its origin in the Youth League, was adopted.

The Programme suggested that a Council of Action should work for the boycott and abolition of 'all differential political institutions, and 'employ the following weapons: immediate and active boycott, strike, civil disobedience, non-cooperation and such other means as may bring about the accomplishment and realisation of our aspirations'. It also called for 'a national stoppage of work for one day as a mark of protest against the reactionary policy of the government'. The Programme stated that its fundamental principles were 'inspired by the desire to achieve national freedom. By national freedom we mean freedom from white domination and attainment of political independence.'

At the December 1949 conference the old guard leadership of the ANC was replaced. Dr J S Moroka became President-



General and Dr S M Molema Treasurer-General, while Walter Sisulu was elected the ANC's first full-time Secretary-General. He gave up his living as an estate agent and devoted himself wholly to the work of the ANC. His wife, Albertina, wholeheartedly endorsed his decision. Henceforth, the family would depend on her earnings as a nurse for, though the ANC offered Sisulu £5 a month as a wage, it was not often they had the money to pay him.

The phenomenal growth of the ANC in the succeeding decade was not the work of any one man or group of men but was a channelling of the mass revolt of the people against intensifying repression. But there is no doubt that the presence of Walter Sisulu at the centre of affairs was a guarantee of integrity, steadiness, persistence and efficiency which inspired confidence in all who had dealings with the organisation. As the ANC grew, so did Walter Sisulu. He began to see the relationship between the national and class struggles in South Africa, to understand that the repressive state in South Africa was dominated and controlled by a ruling class whose power was based on the exploitation of the mass of the people both as blacks and as workers or peasants. His national consciousness was broadened as he began to work with the organisations of the Indian and Coloured people and progressive whites, all ready to join hands with the Africans in their fight against apartheid oppression and for national liberation. Realising the need for a new theoretical approach, he began to read and study, to plan new methods of struggle.

8 Immediately on achieving power, the Malan government had set about restricting the liberties of its opponents. During

1949 meetings of Sam Kahn, Communist Member of Parliament, were banned in the Transvaal under the Riotous Assemblies Act and restrictions were also placed on Dr Yusuf Dadoo, Indian Congress leader, who was banned from speaking in the eight main centres of the country. Passports were refused to trade unionists and African students wishing to study abroad. Publications were being censored en masse by decrees in the *Government Gazette*. A Defend Free Speech Convention held in Johannesburg on 26 March 1950, with the participation of the ANC, the South African Indian Congress (SAIC), the African People's Organisation (APO) and the Communist Party called for demonstrations on 1 May against the pass laws, for full franchise, land, decent wages and the repeal of all discriminatory laws. The demonstrations were a huge success, 80 per cent of Witwatersrand workers going on strike and bringing industry to a halt. But in the afternoon and evening the police resorted to violence, 18 people being killed and an unknown number injured. A few days later the Unlawful Organisations Bill (later renamed the Suppression of Communism Bill) was published, proposing to give the government the power to ban not only the Communist Party but any organisation or individual opposing the government's policies.

After an emergency meeting of its executive at Thaba 'Nchu (Dr Moroka's home town), the ANC executive launched a campaign for a national day of protest. The Indian Congress, APO, ANC Youth League and the Communist Party immediately declared their support, and the date was fixed for 26 June—South Africa's first Freedom Day.

Walter Sisulu said in a statement:



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The African people should not be bluffed by the title of the Bill. It will leave no chance for them to protest and fight for the interests of all oppressed people... Although the Unlawful Organisations Bill purports to be directed against Communism in general and the Communist Party of South Africa in particular, the ANC Executive is satisfied that it is primarily directed against Africans and other oppressed people, and designed to frustrate all their attempts to work for the fulfilment of their legitimate demands and aspirations.”

Sisulu and Yusuf Cachalia, of the Indian Congress, were appointed joint secretaries of the National Day of Protest Committee set up to protest against the Suppression of Communism Bill and the 1 May killings, and the effectiveness of their work was summed up by Sisulu in his report on the 26 June strike. Describing it as ‘an outstanding success...in the face of intensive and relentless police intimidation’, he estimated that 50 per cent of all workers stayed at home, and in Alexandra and Western Native Township 80 per cent.

These were the first steps in the implementation of the Programme of Action which converted the ANC into an effective mass political organisation enjoying the loyalty and support of millions of people throughout the country. The 26 June Day of Protest laid the foundations for the joint action of the Congresses which ultimately consolidated itself in the ‘Congress Alliance’ whose initiatives dominated the political scene in the 1950s.

The next phase of the struggle culminated in the 1952 ‘Campaign of Defiance of Unjust Laws’. Walter Sisulu, Dr Moroka, J B Marks, Dr Dadoo and Yusuf Cachalia were appointed members of a Joint Planning Council after a meeting of the executives of the ANC, SAIC and APO with observers from the Franchise Action Council (set up in 1951 to oppose the Nationalist government’s legislation to removed Coloured voters from the common voters’ roll). The report of the Planning Council, drawn up after two months’ work, was endorsed by the ANC’s annual conference in December 1951, and in January 1952 President-General Dr Moroka and Secretary-General Walter Sisulu wrote to Prime Minister Malan calling for the repeal of six ‘unjust laws’ by 29 February, failing which protest meetings and demonstrations would be held on 6 April 1952, when whites would be celebrating the 300th anniversary of the arrival of Jan van Riebeeck at the Cape in 1652.

The six unjust laws were the pass laws, stock limitation, the Group Areas Act, the Suppression of Communism Act, the Coloured Voters Act and the Bantu Authorities Act — keystones of the apartheid state being set up by the Nationalist government. It was perhaps a sign of the growing power and influence of the ANC that Dr Malan took the trouble to reply, stressing that the differences between the races in South Africa were ‘permanent and not man-made’ and that the government ‘will under no circumstances entertain the idea of giving administrative or executive or legislative powers over Europeans, or within a European community, to Bantu men and women, or to other smaller non-European groups. The Government, therefore, has no intention



of repealing the long-existing laws differentiating between European and Bantu.'

The Defiance Campaign was launched on the second anniversary of Freedom Day, 26 June 1952, and in all about 8,000 people in various parts of the country went to jail for defying the unjust laws. Sisulu himself was a member of a group of 52 Africans and Indians, led by the veteran Indian Congressman Nana Sita, who entered Boksburg location without permits. He was fined £1 with the alternative of seven days' imprisonment, but not before he had told the court:

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‘Our position has so worsened that today white South Africa has put in office a government which has closed all constitutional channels between itself and my people and whose barbarous and godless policies have shocked enlightened people all over the world. As an African and national secretary of the Congress I cannot stand aside on an issue which is a matter of life and death to my people. My duty is perfectly clear – it is to take the lead and to share with the humblest of my countrymen the crushing burden imposed on us because of the colour of our skins. In conclusion, I wish to make this solemn vow and in full appreciation of the consequences it entails. As long as I enjoy the confidence of my people, and as long as there is a spark of life and energy in me, I shall fight with courage and determination for the abolition of discriminatory laws and for the freedom of all South Africans irrespective of colour or creed.’  
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10 | Later in the year Sisulu and 19 others were rearrested and charged under the Suppression of Communism Act for their

part in organising the Defiance Campaign. They were sentenced to nine months' imprisonment, suspended for two years, Judge Rumpff remarking that their offence amounted to 'statutory communism' under the Act but had nothing to do with 'what is commonly known as communism'. He added that he accepted 'the evidence that you consistently advised your followers to follow a peaceful course of action and to avoid violence in any shape or form.'

Having been convicted under the Act, Sisulu became liable to administrative action by the Minister of Justice, who quickly served a notice on him banning him from meetings and confining him to the magisterial district of Johannesburg. Similar notices were served on many other Congress leaders and trade unionists, and the *Guardian* newspaper was banned as part of the government's attempt to eliminate the opposition.

A significant feature of the Defiance Campaign was the meeting in November 1952 of over 200 whites called together by the National Action Committee of the ANC and SAIC, and addressed by Sisulu, Tambo and Cachalia, at which the Congress of Democrats was formed. The silence of white democrats on the issues involved in the Defiance Campaign, said Tambo, was being construed by blacks as acquiescence in and approval of the government's policies. After Sisulu had pointed out that the limited franchise proposals being advanced by some white liberals would have no appeal for the majority of blacks, the meeting passed a resolution expressing support for equal rights for all and the aims of the Defiance Campaign. Thus was forged another component of the Congress Alliance which





A delegation at the Congress of the People, Kliptown, 25-26 June 1955  
(Picture by Eli Weinberg)



Another delegation parades its demands (Picture by Eli Weinberg)



Demonstrators express solidarity  
with Congress leaders,  
including Walter Sisulu,  
during the Treason Trial  
(Picture by Eli Weinberg)





QUARTZ ST. 17-23

WE  
STAND  
BY OUR  
LEADERS

WE  
STAND  
BY OUR  
LEADERS

WE  
STAND  
BY OUR  
LEADERS

WE  
STAND  
BY OUR  
LEADERS



played so significant a role in the ensuing decade.

The commitment which Sisulu had declared and demonstrated in the Defiance Campaign was sustained and strengthened in campaign after campaign launched by the Congress Alliance — the campaign against the mass removal of blacks from Johannesburg's 'western areas', the campaign for the Congress of the People and the adoption of the Freedom Charter at Kliptown in 1955, the bus and potato boycotts and political strikes of the late 1950s, the campaign against the pass laws which culminated in the 1960 state of emergency and the banning of the ANC, the turn to armed struggle and the formation of Umkhonto we Sizwe, the military wing of the ANC. At the heart of every action was Walter Sisulu — calm, composed and determined, planning, agitating, organising, mobilising his people for struggle. Every day for him was a day of action, and the action continued at night and over weekends when his home was always crowded with visitors seeking instruction or advice or just wanting to talk politics. Those who had dealings with him remember his sense of humour, his smile and his warmth rather than the frown of concentration or anger. Gifted with the common touch, he won the support of his comrades and his people by persuasion, not command. Nobody ever saw him downhearted.

He left the country but once, in July 1953, on a visit to a number of countries in Europe and Asia on behalf of the ANC and SAIC. He and Duma Nokwe were amongst the guests of the Youth and Student Festival in August in Bucharest, and he also visited Israel, Poland, China, the USSR and Britain. Reporting back to the ANC conference in December 1953, Sisulu said that what impressed him most

in the socialist countries was 'the abolition of unemployment and the tremendously sincere desire for peace'.

Asked later whether his trip might have antagonised well-wishers and supporters of the ANC, Sisulu replied: 'As far as the non-whites are concerned, certainly not. They look upon these countries as their nearest friends who have unreservedly supported their case at the United Nations Organisation. My visit was a goodwill visit on behalf of democratic South Africa, both white and black. South Africa needs friends both in the East and the West.'

The immediate task of the people of South Africa was to win the right to determine what sort of society they are going to live in. 'When democratic rights have been won, we can discuss what type of social system we are going to have.'

The moment his ban under the Suppression of Communism Act expired, Sisulu was back at work, addressing meetings, travelling, organising, inspiring. Professor Z K Matthews paid tribute to him in his presidential address to the

ANC (Cape) on 26 June 1954:  
"As for the general secretary, it is hardly necessary for me to welcome him here. He is the son of the Cape Province and he was with us quite recently. During his recent Cape tour he was instrumental in taking the ANC right into the heart of the Transkei, that area which is supposed to be surrounded by an Iron Curtain. During his brief sojourn there, they sought him here, they sought him there, they sought him everywhere, and when he had already returned to headquarters, they were still seeking."



A few days later the authorities once again used the Suppression of Communism Act in an attempt to decapitate the ANC. President Lutuli was confined to the Tugela district of Natal where his home was situated, and Sisulu was banned from gatherings for two years and ordered to resign as Secretary-General of the ANC within 30 days. Sisulu said:

“**The time has passed when they [the government] could rule the country as if we, the people, did not exist. The time is against them, the world is against them. We on the other hand are encouraged by the great spirit of the people of South Africa, by the growth of the national liberatory movement, by the unprecedented political consciousness of the people and by the fact that the truth is with us. We enjoy the confidence of the whole world in this noble and just task for which we are pledged to fight until the dawn of freedom.**”

In an attempt to make sure that Sisulu was immobilised, the security police began to subject him to an ever-increasing regime of surveillance and harassment. In July 1954, one day after the banning notice was served on him, Sisulu was arrested together with Freddie Morris, the Transvaal provincial secretary of the ANC, at the dinner table of Bloemfontein African businessman Mr Keiloe and hauled off to the police station where he was detained for two nights. He was charged with attending a gathering ‘to partake of, or be present whilst others partake of refreshment (in the nature of tea and/or some such other liquid refreshment, and/or edibles and/or a meal)’ and ‘to listen to

what one or more or all of the other persons present had to say about any matter...and/or to have social intercourse.’ It was alleged that ANC matters and preparations for a meeting were to be discussed over the dinner table.

Sisulu was sentenced to three months’ imprisonment in the Kroonstad magistrate’s court but was acquitted on appeal.

Sisulu was one of the 156 arrested on 6 December 1956, in the treason trial, and was one of the key accused who endured the full agony of that ordeal up to the moment of acquittal on 29 March 1961. During the 1960 state of emergency all the accused in this batch were detained in jail for five months. In October 1961, Sisulu was stopped in the street in Johannesburg and driven to Special Branch headquarters, served with a five-year banning order, detained for the night and later sentenced to R30 or 90 days at the Fordsburg Native Commissioner’s Court for not having a reference book.

A few days later Sisulu, Alfred Nzo and Lilian Ngoyi were arrested at a party at Lilian Ngoyi’s home, but after spending three days in jail the charges against them were dropped.

Following his third arrest in two months, Sisulu appeared in the Johannesburg magistrate’s court in January 1962 and was remanded in custody for 10 days under the ‘no bail’ Act. He was charged with forging his pass and, after spending 12 days in prison, released on R50 bail.

In April 1962, Sisulu, Ahmed Kathrada and Ben Turok, national secretary of the Congress of Democrats, were arrested in Kathrada’s flat talking to a foreign journalist. Two months later the charges against them were dropped.

In June 1962 Sisulu was arrested and charged under the Suppression of Com-





**'Treason Trialists' arrive at the Drill Hall for the first day's proceedings**

munism Act. Released on bail of R250, he was ordered to report to the police twice a week.

In August 1962 Sisulu was again picked up by the police as he was walking down Commissioner Street in Johannesburg. Held without bail for 12 days, he was eventually charged with incitement arising from the countrywide strike which had been organised from 29 to 31 May 1961, in protest against the inauguration of the racist 'Republic'. Nelson Mandela, who had gone underground after the strike to organise the resistance, had been arrested in Natal on 5 August and was charged with a similar offence.

The intensified persecution of the ANC leaders followed the launching of Umkhonto we Sizwe with a series of sabotage attacks on 16 December 1961.

Following decades of peaceful and non-violent struggle, the movement had finally resorted to armed struggle as the only way of defending itself against the ferocious repression of the apartheid regime and advancing the cause of liberation. The opening of the trials of Mandela and Sisulu in October 1962 was marked by bomb attacks in Natal and the Western Cape and demonstrations by thousands of supporters in the main centres of the country. Although Mandela and Sisulu faced charges arising from the same strike, their trials were separate – Mandela appearing in Pretoria and Sisulu in Johannesburg. Mandela faced two charges – incitement to strike and leaving the country without permission – and was eventually sentenced to five years' imprisonment. Sisulu was also charged with incitement to strike but faced a second charge arising from documents





**Angry crowds during the Treason Trial**

found in his home by the police which were held to show that he was promoting the aims of the ANC. He was sentenced to six years' imprisonment in March 1963.

His case had dragged out for nearly five months and during this period he had been free on bail of R1,000. After the sentence the magistrate withdrew the bail but it was reinstated on appeal to the Supreme Court. Sisulu was again released, this time on bail of R6,000. His 'freedom', however, was both limited and dangerous; in October 1962 he had been placed under house arrest (see Appendix). Ten days later, following the death of his mother, Sisulu was arrested at his home for attending a 'gathering' created by the mourners who had come to pay their last respects. At the conclusion of the incitement case, Sisulu realised that time had run out for him and on 20 April 1963 he

went underground to join the High Command of Umkhonto we Sizwe.

On 26 June, Freedom Day, 1963, the country was electrified on hearing the voice of Walter Sisulu broadcasting over Radio ANC. It was a typical Sisulu message — direct, forceful and down to earth:

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**'Sons and daughters of Africa:**

**'I speak to you from somewhere in South Africa.**

**'I have not left the country.**

**'I do not plan to leave.**

**'Many of our leaders of the African National Congress have gone underground. This is to keep the organisation in action; to preserve the leadership; to keep the freedom fight going. Never has the country, and our people, needed leader-**



ship as they do now, in this hour of crisis.  
'Our house is on fire.

'It is the duty of the people of our land — every man and every woman — to rally behind our leaders. There is no time to stand and watch. Thousands are in jail including our dynamic Nelson Mandela. Many are banished to remote parts of the country. Robben Island is a giant concentration camp for political prisoners. Men and women, including my wife, rot in cells under Vorster's vicious laws to imprison without trial. Men wait in death cells to be hanged. Men die for freedom.

'South Africa is in a permanent state of emergency. Any policeman may arrest any South African — and need not bring him to trial. People may be hanged for appealing to the United Nations to intervene. Under the Bantu Laws Amendment Bill, the pass laws will turn children into orphans, wives into widows, men into slaves. We must intensify the attack on the pass laws. We must fight against the removal of the Africans from the Western Cape. We must reject once and for all times the Bantustan fraud. No act of government must go unchallenged. The struggle must never waver. We, the African National Congress, will lead with new methods of struggle. The African people know that their unity is vital. Only by united action can we overthrow this government.

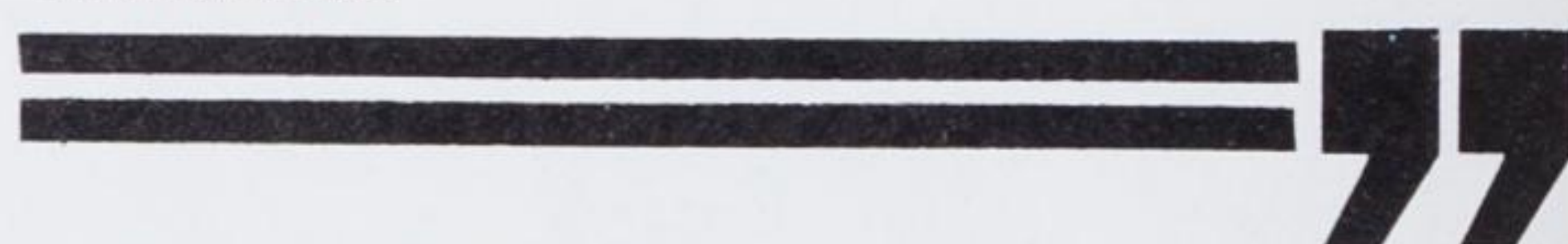
'We call on all our people to unite and struggle. Workers and peasants; teachers and students; ministers of religion and all churches: we call upon all our people, of whatever shade of opinion. We say: the hour has come for us to stand together. This is the only way to freedom. We warn the government that drastic laws will not stop our struggle for liberation. Throughout the ages men have sacrificed — they

have given their lives for their ideals. And we are also determined to surrender our lives for our freedom.

'In the face of violence, men struggling for freedom have had to meet violence with violence. How can it be otherwise in South Africa? Changes must come. Changes for the better, but not without sacrifice. Your sacrifice. My sacrifice.

'We face tremendous odds. We know that. But our unity, our determination, our sacrifice, our organisation are our weapons. We must succeed! We will succeed!

'Amandla!'



On 11 July Sisulu and other leaders of Umkhonto we Sizwe were arrested at their Rivonia headquarters. For months they were held in solitary confinement, ceaselessly and often brutally 'interrogated' by the security police. Some were viciously assaulted. Even their lawyers were denied access to them until two days before their indictment on 9 October 1963. Nelson Mandela was brought from Robben Island to join them in the dock when their trial finally got under way on 3 December. They faced four charges arising from the prosecution's interpretation of the document *Operation Mayibuye* which was found at Rivonia:

1. Recruiting persons for training in sabotage and guerrilla warfare for purposes of violent revolution.
2. Conspiring to commit the aforesaid and to aid foreign military units when they invaded the Republic.
3. Acting in these ways to further the objects of communism.
4. Soliciting and receiving money for these purposes from sympathisers in Algeria, Ethiopia, Liberia, Nigeria, Tunisia and elsewhere (the countries visited by



Mandela on his 1962 tour).

Asked to plead, Mandela said: 'My Lord, the government, not I, should be in the dock. I plead not guilty to all charges.'

Sisulu: 'The government is responsible for what has happened in this country. I plead not guilty.'

The details of the Rivonia trial are well known and Nelson Mandela's moving statement from the dock has become a classic of liberation literature as well as an inspiration to struggle. The decision of the accused was that Mandela should speak from the dock so that he would not be interrupted or subjected to cross-examination or heckling from the prosecutor.

Sisulu was in the box for five days. From the outset he made it clear he would say nothing and answer no questions which might lead to the identification and prosecution of others, and he calmly and firmly refused to be provoked by the prosecution. He expounded the policy of the ANC, explained the resort to violence, rejected the racist sneers and innuendos of the vicious prosecutor, Percy Yutar. Sisulu demonstrated that a man who is clear in his ideology and convinced of the logic and justice of his cause, without self-deception or conceit, is more than a match for his enemies.

During his detention, Sisulu revealed, he was told he faced the death penalty but could avoid being hanged if he gave information to the police. He refused to cooperate. The authorities could do what they liked.

Like Mandela, Sisulu made it clear that in helping to form Umkhonto we Sizwe the ANC was not abandoning its hope for a peaceful solution, nor was it committed to a programme of reckless killing and destruction. Asked what had happened to

the policies advanced by the ANC in the 1940s and 1950s, Sisulu replied:

**“Well, I'd like to mention that both in policy, programme and practice, the ANC adopted the most reasonable and sober attitude for unity and harmony of its citizens . . . but the Europeans of this country, through their political representatives, were not prepared to accept the line we have chosen to a peaceful settlement of all problems by negotiations.”**

The government had consistently refused the ANC's call for a national convention of all peoples to discuss future constitutional arrangements. 'Instead they chose to make South Africa an armed camp. . . With the banning of meetings, banning of organisations and suppressing of all legal methods, it was not possible for Africans to accept this situation. No self-respecting African would accept this situation...' The African people were driven to violence in sheer self-defence, and the violence would grow. By taking part in the work of Umkhonto we Sizwe, said Sisulu, 'I felt that in the interests of my own people it would be better that we should bring about a state of affairs whereby such violence would be controlled.' The only solution in South Africa was for white and black to learn to live together in peace and harmony and equality.

The years of incarceration on Robben Island\* have meant for Sisulu and his

\* Walter Sisulu, together with Nelson Mandela, Raymond Mhlaba and Andrew Mlangeni, was transferred from Robben Island prison to Pollsmoor Prison, Cape Town, in April 1982 after spending 18 years on Robben Island.





**Albertina Notsikelelo Sisulu**

comrades not the end of their struggle but simply its transfer to a new and more difficult arena. At the time of writing, Sisulu has been behind bars for almost 19 years, Mandela for nearly 20. For them and others, life imprisonment means the government intends them to remain in prison for the rest of their natural lives. In March 1963 the Minister of Justice announced that there would be no remission of sentence for any person convicted under the security laws. Not a single day has been knocked off the jail term of any political prisoner.

The Rivonia men on Robben Island, who were the leaders outside prison, are also the leaders inside prison, leaders of the daily struggle the prisoners have had to wage against an administration determined to break their spirits. Every day the prisoners face insult, humiliation and provocation, injustice meted out by petty tyrants in the name of 'white civilisation'. Every day the prisoners have had to brace themselves for some new assault, have

had to fight for their rights, assert their personalities. Under the leadership of men like Mandela, Sisulu, Mbeki and others, the prisoners have been disciplined, determined and courageous. They have gone on deputations, fought court cases, gone on hunger strike. They have faced and overcome every challenge.

As Francis Meli wrote recently:<sup>1</sup>

**“The racist rulers have converted the Island into a harsh prison camp – a grey, soulless, cruel spot, designed to crush the spirit of the bravest and truest leaders of our revolt against the apartheid system, to douse once and for all the flames of rebellion in our hearts, to deter and subdue us forever.**

**‘This was the intention but...the racists**

1. Francis Meli, ANC Director of External Publicity, in his foreword to *Island in Chains: Ten Years on Robben Island* by Prisoner 885/63, as told by Indres Naidoo to Albie Sachs (Penguin Books, 1982), p 7.





**Zwelakhe Sisulu**

**failed. The struggle continued, on the Island and off, the fires of resistance continued to burn, and Robben Island became nationally and internationally synonymous not with defeat but with courage and indestructibility.'**

The Robben Island prisoners have become the focus of resistance not only in prison but throughout South Africa. The names of Mandela, Sisulu and their comrades are on the lips of the youth in Soweto and wherever the masses are in action—in the schools and universities, in the factories, on the picket line, at funerals, church services and demonstrations. If anything, their stature and significance have grown because of the ordeal to which they have been subjected and under the blows of which they have been steeled and tempered. Nor have the prisoners been merely passive endurers or mindless stoics. They have constantly been studying and learning, arguing and

discussing, framing solutions for the problems of the country. Many of the initiatives which have been put into practice by the people outside have had their origin on Robben Island.

Walter Sisulu is the man he always was—older and wiser, but just as determined and immovable in the face of threat or danger, still as positive in his thinking and acting, optimistic and forward-looking, as convinced as ever that he will see freedom in his lifetime. His influence on his comrades is immense. He takes time to consider his verdict, refuses to be rushed into a hasty decision, weighs the pros and cons, but when his mind is made up he is utterly secure in himself and an inexhaustible source of confidence for others. His peers always seek his agreement, the youth look upon him as a father figure. He is still the rock of the ANC, the man at the centre who holds everything together.

South Africa needs Sisulu and his comrades. They have given a great deal to their country, but they could give so much more if the shackles of apartheid were struck from their limbs. Nor is it merely a question of releasing a few hundred men from jail. All South Africa must be converted from the prison-house it now is for the majority of its people into the free and democratic society which has been outlined in the Freedom Charter, a society which will have no need to victimise its proudest and most gifted spirits because they have dared to fight for freedom.

No profile of Walter Sisulu would be complete without mentioning his wife Albertina. Born in 1917, she was not only a wife and mother who kept a home going and attended to all the needs of husband, children and grandchildren, as well as the constant stream of visitors to the house.



Albertina Notsikelelo Sisulu was also working independently in various spheres of Congress activity, and endured forced brutal repression by the racist regime.

She has been under a longer period of continuous banning than any other person in South Africa, spending more than a quarter of her life under restrictions which confined her to her home and drastically curtailed her social and political work. But nothing dampened her commitment. She has become a symbol of courage, fortitude and calm endurance.

Albertina was born in the Transkei and trained as a nurse and midwife. During the 1940s she joined the ANC Women's League and was elected its treasurer in 1959. She was also very active in the Federation of South African Women, of which she was a committee member.

In October 1958 she was arrested with one thousand women demonstrating in Johannesburg against the pass laws. In 1961 she was a member of a deputation to the Johannesburg City Council to present a memorandum protesting against large-scale arrests for rent arrears in the townships. In 1963, together with her 16-year-old son Max, Albertina Sisulu was arrested and held in solitary confinement under the 90-day 'no-trial law' by police trying to elicit from her the whereabouts of Walter, who had gone underground. On her release she was elected Transvaal President of the Federation of South African Women.

In 1964 she was issued a five-year banning order. When it expired, the ban was renewed for a further five years, plus a house arrest order confining her to her home in Orlando, Soweto, from 6pm to 6am during weekdays and for 24 hours over weekends. She managed to support herself by working as a nurse. In 1974,

when a third banning order was served on her, the house arrest provision was extended to cover public holidays. Under her fourth order, a two-year ban imposed in July 1979, she was permitted to go to church and the 12-hour house arrest clause was lifted. However, she was still confined to Johannesburg, could not be quoted, could not attend gatherings, and could not enter a school or factory or take part in any social gathering without special permission. She was also required to apply for permission to visit her husband on Robben Island.

Throughout the years under bans, Albertina Sisulu brought up and educated her five children and two children of her deceased sister, as well as caring for seven grandchildren. Her daughter Lindiwe is active in the ranks of the ANC somewhere in Africa after being detained for 11 months, tortured and assaulted following the 1976 Soweto disturbances. Her son Max is also working for the ANC external mission. Another son, Zwelakhe, a journalist, worked for the *Rand Daily Mail* and later was news editor of the *Sunday Post* before it was banned in January 1981. He was elected President of the Media Workers' Association of South Africa before himself being placed under a banning order. He was detained later in 1981 and released in February 1982 after spending 251 days in solitary confinement without ever being charged or brought to court.

Since the expiry of her banning order at the end of July 1981, Albertina Sisulu has been an indefatigable speaker at public meetings up and down the country, agitating for the release of all political prisoners, protesting against detention without trial and the torture and murder of political prisoners.



## APPENDIX:

To: Walter Max Ulyate Sisulu,  
7372 Orlando West Location,  
Johannesburg.

### Notice in Terms of Paragraph (a) of Sub-section (I) of Section *Ten* of the Suppression of Communism Act, 1950 (Act No 44 of 1950).

Whereas I, Balthazar Johannes Vorster, Minister of Justice of the Republic of South Africa, am satisfied that you are engaged in activities which are furthering or may further the achievement of the objects of communism, I hereby, in terms of paragraph (a) of sub-section (I) of section *ten* of the Suppression of Communism Act, 1950 (Act No 44 of 1950), prohibit you for a period commencing on the date on which this notice is delivered or tendered to you and expiring on the 31st October, 1967, from—

(a) absenting yourself from the residential premises situate at 7372 Orlando West Location—

- (i) at any time on public holidays;
- (ii) from two o'clock in the afternoon on Saturdays up to seven o'clock in the forenoon on Mondays;
- (iii) during the hours of six o'clock in the afternoon and seven o'clock in the forenoon on days other than those referred to in (i) and (ii) above;

(b) absenting yourself from the magisterial district of Johannesburg;

(c) being within—

- (i) any location, native hostel or native village as defined in the Natives (Urban Areas) Conso-

lidation Act, 1945 (Act No 25 of 1945) except Orlando West;

- (ii) the area of jurisdiction of the Alexandra Local Area Committee as defined in Administrator's Proclamation No 27 of the 3rd February, 1958;
- (iii) any native compound;
- (iv) the premises of any factory as defined in the Factories, Machinery and Building Work Act, 1941 (Act No 22 of 1941);
- (d) communicating in any manner whatsoever with any person whose name appears on any list in the custody of the officer referred to in section *eight* of the said Suppression of Communism Act, 1950, or in respect of whom any prohibition under the said Suppression of Communism Act, 1950, is in force;
- (e) receiving at the said residential premises any visitor other than a medical practitioner for medical attendance on you, if the name of such medical practitioner does not appear on any list in the custody of the officer referred to in section *eight* of the said Suppression of Communism Act, 1950, and no prohibition under the said Suppression of Communism Act, 1950, is in force in respect of such medical practitioner.

Given under my hand at Pretoria on this 19th day of October, 1962.

**Minister of Justice**

Messages of greetings can be sent to the Sisulu family, c/o Mrs Albertina Sisulu, 7372 Orlando West, PO Phirima, Johannesburg, South Africa.



# TREASON TRIAL

*The*  
ACCUSED

DECEMBER  
1956



24 A group photograph of the 156 accused in the Treason Trial.  
Walter Sisulu is in the sixth row. (Picture by Eli Weinberg)







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