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The Association of Citizens Against Racism and Apartheid

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BIOGRAPHY - PETER MAHLANGU

Peter Mahlangu has spent almost the last three months inside South Africa. In December 1990 he participated in the ANC Consultative Forum attended by over 1600 delegates; the first time the ANC has met inside South Africa since it was banned in 1960. During the month of February he participated in numerous discussions and gatherings. ***He brings us the latest information on the struggle for liberation inside South Africa! He will lead workshops at the International Centre on Tuesday evening, March 12th from 7:30 pm - 9:30 pm on Violence In Natal and the Townships and Education In South Africa, and at the Edmonton Public Library on Saturday, March 16th from 1:00 pm - 4:00 pm on the Role of the ANC, Psychological Effects of Apartheid, Women, Sanctions, and International Solidarity.***

Peter Mahlangu is the Chief Representative to Canada of the African National Congress.

He was born in South Africa in 1951 in Lamontville, a township near Durban in the province of Natal. He comes from a large extended family of two sisters and five brothers. In South African society apartheid exerts tremendous destabilizing pressure on black families. Peter's was no exception. When his father died, there were no social services for the family to fall back on. Peter's mother was forced to take a job and work long hours to keep food on the table and hold the family together. As the eldest of the eight children, Peter shouldered much of the responsibility for looking after his sisters, brothers and cousins, including cooking breakfast for them each day and making sure they got to school.

Peter's family obligations made it exceedingly difficult for him to get an education. Determined to do so, however, he managed to complete his Junior Certificate (Grade 10) in Lamontville and even obtained a scholarship to finish his schooling at the Zulu Training College in Amanzimtoti.

During his final year at college, Peter helped organize a strike against the use of corporal punishment in the school. As a result of his political activities, he was expelled from the college and prevented from completing Form 5. Undaunted as ever, Peter enrolled in correspondence courses and successfully obtained his Matriculation through the mail.

In 1975, Peter began working for Richards Bay Minerals, a Canadian multi-national corporation owned by Quebec Iron and Titanium (QIT), based in Empangeni, Natal. Paid the Canadian equivalent of 38-40 cents per hour, Peter gained firsthand experience of Canada's corporate exploitation of black labour in South Africa. QIT, with the support of the South African regime, orchestrated the forced removal of thousands of black families in areas where rich deposits of titanium lay beneath the ground. Whole families were simply uprooted and banished to barren and unproductive parcels of land many miles away. Housing on the new reserves was substandard and sanitary facilities non-existent.

At about this time many strong, independent black trade unions were emerging throughout the country, and particularly in Peter's home province of Natal. Organizers in the South African Allied Workers Union (SAAWU) assisted Peter and the workers at Richards Bay in unionizing QIT, but not without a bitter struggle. In 1981, after helping to organize major strikes in the area, Peter was prevented from returning to Empangeni and his job with QIT. He then began working full-time as a SAAWU organizer in the Union's Durban office.

Peter paid the price for his increased involvement in trade union activities. He became the frequent target of harassment and persecution by the South African authorities. Eventually the pressure became so great that he was forced to flee South Africa for the Frontline States. Having already made contact with the ANC and SACTU, he was quickly integrated into the underground structures of SACTU inside South Africa.

These events took place in the early 1980's when SACTU was working hard to unite the many new, independent black trade unions into one above-ground central body. The formation of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) in early December, 1985 was the historic culmination of all these efforts to build a lasting and united trade union movement against apartheid. As an underground SACTU organizer, Peter played a significant role in the unity process.

As part of its program to strengthen international working class solidarity, SACTU selected Peter to come to Canada as the permanent SACTU coordinator in 1986. His task was to build upon six years of work by the Canadian SACTU Solidarity Committee. Peter's experience in both above-ground and under-ground union activities made him particularly well qualified to build stronger solidarity links in the international struggle against apartheid.

Peter's experience as a union organizer serves him well in his work as the ANC's Chief Representative to Canada. He works closely with the many individuals that make up Canada's anti-apartheid community. Of special concern to him is the leadership role he believes the Canadian government can play in the international community by imposing comprehensive and mandatory sanctions against South Africa, a belief he knows to be supported by the large majority of Canadians.

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Note: Peter Mahlangu will be undertaking studies at the University of Toronto commencing March 25, 1991. He hopes to obtain a teaching degree and return to his homeland where he will participate in the rebuilding of a new and democratic South Africa by teaching the youth of South Africa.