

M. P. NAICKER¹

The coming together of Africans and Indians in South Africa in joint action against racial discrimination, and the development from joint action to the building of a united multi-racial movement, was a long and difficult process. One of the Indians who contributed greatly to this unity was Mariemuthoo Pragalathan Naicker - "M.P." to his many friends - who passed away ten years ago on April 29, 1977.

He was the first Indian to be appointed to a responsible position in the African National Congress, as Director of Publicity and Information and as editor of *Sechaba*, the official organ of ANC, from 1966 until he died of a heart attack on a flight from London to Berlin.

M.P. was born on July 28, 1920, in a poor Indian family in Natal, descendants of indentured labourers. He had little formal schooling. He began work in a factory at an early age and then became a driver of a bakery van.

By the time he was eighteen, he had become a trade union organiser. Together with H.A. Naidoo and George Ponnen, he organised Indian workers all over Natal and was elected Secretary of the Natal Sugar Workers' Union. He also helped bring about co-operation between Indian and African workers in the trade union movement. He was arrested and beaten up while helping to organise a laundry workers' strike in Durban. That was the first of the numerous occasions when he was jailed by the racist authorities.

He joined the Liberal Study Circle, a forum for the study of nationalism and Marxism, where he met with African, Coloured and white radicals. He became a key figure in the Anti-Segregation Council of the Natal Indian Congress which helped change the Congress from a small organisation of traders and professionals engaged in mere petitions against discrimination into a mass movement committed to the unity of all oppressed people and to militant action for full equality.

Recognised as an able organiser, he was appointed Secretary of the Natal Passive Resistance Council when the Indian Congresses launched the passive resistance campaign of 1946-1948 against the "ghetto act", in which over 2,000 men and women courted arrest. He served four months in prison with hard labour² and was soon elected Secretary of the Natal Indian Congress.

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² He was convicted in August 1948 on the charge of aiding and abetting passive resisters to defy the law prohibiting Indians from crossing provincial barriers without permit.

In 1949 when riots broke out between Zulus and Indians in Durban, and were fanned by white racists, he worked tirelessly with African leaders to restore peace. African- Indian unity emerged stronger and M.P. was active in organising the mass protests against apartheid in May-June 1950.

After the Suppression of Communism Act was passed in 1950, he was banned under the Act from any trade union activity. He took up journalism, serving as the editor-manager of the Durban office of *Guardian*, the Communist weekly, and its successors, until they were all finally suppressed in 1963.

He helped organise the Campaign of Defiance against Unjust Laws in 1952, the multi-racial passive resistance campaign in which over 8,000 people went to jail, as Joint Secretary of the Natal Action Committee of the ANC and the Natal Indian Congress. He served a term of imprisonment in the campaign. He also helped organise the 1955 Congress of the People which adopted the South African Freedom Charter. He was one of the accused in the treason trial of 156 leaders of the freedom movement which dragged on from 1956 to 1961. He was detained for six months during the State of Emergency in 1960. He was again detained in 1963 and, after release, charged with several Africans in Ladysmith with furthering the aims of the ANC.

He escaped from South Africa in 1966 on instructions from the movement to work at the ANC external mission in London.

I met M.P. soon after his arrival in London and on many occasions since then in London and at international conferences.

I was anxious, as head of the United Nations Centre against Apartheid, to obtain and publicise papers on the South African freedom struggle by participants in that struggle. M.P. wrote excellent papers for us on the African Mine Labour Strike of 1946 and the Defiance Campaign of 1952, and helped obtain papers from many others in the liberation movement. He was for me one of the best sources of information and advice on the history of the liberation struggle and the evolution of the policies of the liberation movement.

I was always impressed not only by his knowledge and sense of responsibility, but also by his warmth and modesty - and even more by his excellent relations with his African colleagues in the movement.

An able and committed journalist, he became a member of the executive of the International Organisation of Journalists and was awarded its Julius Fucik medal in 1976.

Oliver Tambo, President of the ANC, had a high regard for him and flew to London to attend his funeral on May 8, 1977. Two African poets - John

Matshikiza and A.N.C. Kumalo - wrote poems for his funeral. The ANC said in its statement:

"M.P. has passed away at what is probably the beginning of the most challenging time in the history of our struggle. We salute him for his contribution, one which he began as a young man. And it is without question the solid foundation he so ably helped to establish which makes it possible for our movement to meet the demands we face in our revolutionary struggle. The cream of our youth is flooding to the African National Congress today and living up to the finest traditions of struggle. This is the best tribute which can be made to M.P. and comrades like him."