

DOCUMENTS: SOUTH AFRICA

Address to UNITED NATIONS, 11/26/90, by Joseph Reilly

Your Excellency, Distinguished Members of the Special Political Committee,

I am honored to have another occasion to address this Special Political Committee. Last year, I demonstrated to this Committee that the commitment of national and international library organizations to the liberation movement in South Africa was not only negligible, but often counterproductive. This year I might have reported the same, were it not for the fact that rank-and-file librarians in South Africa, the United States, Scandinavia and elsewhere grew impatient with the leadership of their organizations and forged ahead to re-align librarianship with the policies, strategies and goals of the liberation movement.

In the United States, the Progressive Librarians Guild was formed not long after my testimony here last November. The Guild now has over 200 members in 26 states, and has been at the head of the struggle to maintain the cultural and academic boycott as defined by the May 1989 Guidelines of the African National Congress. To this effect, the Guild joined other components of the American Library Association (ALA) to block the powerful U.S. publishing industry - represented by the Association of American Publishers - from receiving *carte blanche* approval from the ALA Executive to re-enter the *apartheid* market. The Guild alerted the ANC and relevant bodies of the Mass Democratic Movement that this lobby was attempting to break the boycott. At the ALA's Mid-Winter Conference in January 1990, the ANC's Chief Representative to the United Nations, Tebogo Mafole, issued a statement spelling out the liberation movement's policies on interactions with South Africa. This statement helped block a resolution calling for an end to the boycott. At the ALA's Annual Conference in June 1990, the publishing lobby made another attempt at breaking the boycott: it solicited a statement from the Congress of South African Writers in a most deceptive manner, and then quoted this statement out of context to suit their own purpose. We alerted the Congress of this falsification, and they sent a second statement which spelled out in no uncertain terms that they were committed to the established policies of the liberation movement, and that no statement they wrote could be construed as advocating a breakdown of the boycott. As a result of this, and the powerful testimony of the great South African poet, Dennis Brutus, and the testimonies of librarians from virtually every constituency of the ALA, the Executive was forced to draw up an official resolution stating that it would not heed the publishers call for an end to the boycott.

On the international level, members of the ANC, Progressive Librarians Guild, the BIS group of Scandinavian librarians, the Library and Information Workers Organization (from South Africa), and others set up a picket at the annual conference of the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) in August 1990. Placing no qualifications on which delegates could represent South African librarianship, IFLA was in fact bestowing its blessing on *apartheid* librarians who have staunchly defended *apartheid* censorship, *apartheid* education and *apartheid* amenities. It is librarians such as these who allow their facilities to refuse services to those citizens whose pigmentation they cannot bear to have in their midst. When the de Klerk Government lifted the Separate Amenities Act of 1953 a few weeks ago, it did so irresponsibly. There are so many loopholes now that any municipality wishing to bar groups of citizens from using their facilities may do so with ease.

As a result, we see the Witbank Public Library institute a \$7.80 "deposit fee" on books taken out by so-called "non-residents": since Witbank's residents are all white, as determined by the Group Areas Act, this maneuver maintains the Witbank Public Library as an *apartheid* institution. The Bethel Public Library took stronger steps than this: it instituted a \$200 "annual fee," again for so-called "non-residents." The best effort to prevent public access to the public library was made by the enlightened administrators of the Newcastle Public Library, which simply declared itself closed to all "new" members. During celebrations of the Freedom Charter in June, patrons in the town of Ashtown were evicted from the whites-only public library when they attempted to apply for membership. The patrons then set up a picket line. The South African Police arrived, gave the patrons 5 minutes to disperse and then fired birdshot, which resulted in serious injuries. The patrons were there to celebrate that part of the Freedom Charter which states, "The doors of learning and culture shall be opened." Apparently, the municipal board of Ashtown feels otherwise.

The point here is that the government-approved library organization - the South African Institute of Library and Information Science (SAILIS) - has yet to be heard from with regard to any of these incidents. Last year I told this Committee about Joyce Mabudafhasi, a librarian who is also a leading activist in the United Democratic Front. After her house was bombed in the mid-1980's, Joyce was detained from 1986 until January 1989. Did SAILIS protest on her behalf? Did SAILIS demand that this librarian be released immediately? Did SAILIS organize other librarians to speak up on her behalf? No. Just a few weeks ago, it appears that another assassination attempt was made against this courageous woman. Why won't SAILIS speak up for their colleague? It is clear that Joyce is not their colleague. She is a librarian who participates in the liberation of *apartheid*

South Africa, and SAILIS is an organization that participates in maintaining the status quo in *apartheid* South Africa.

A group of South African librarians that grew tired of SAILIS formed a new structure, the Library and Information Workers Organization (LIWO), in July 1990. LIWO is dedicated to the Freedom Charter, and though they are still regionally based, they hope to become a national library structure within a year or two. This organization is asking important questions about South African librarianship: Can existing librarians unlearn the old practices and the old professional ideology? Why is accessing information designed the way it is in South Africa. If possible, how can one repair the damage caused to library collections by *apartheid*? Can the interests of a non-racist, non-sexist, democratic and redistributive South Africa be served by existing library structures?

At the launch of this new structure, the ANC's Department of Arts and Culture said, "Your task, comrades, is a gigantic one: no less than the establishment of a New Information Order for the new South Africa." A similar sentiment was expressed at a Summer demonstration against the South African Broadcast Company. Workers carried banners reading, "Free the Airwaves," "The People Shall Broadcast," and "Democratise - Don't Privatise." Your Excellency, Distinguished Members of this Committee, is this not a key issue in the building of a new South Africa? Does this not immediately bring to mind the battle in this building, led by brilliant persons such as the late Sean MacBride, for a New World Information and Communications Order?

The reason the U.S. publishing lobby approached librarians to get approval to re-enter *apartheid* South Africa is because we purchase \$4.5 billion worth of materials from them each year. Their battle cry was that [the] book boycott blocked the "free flow of information." But we all know that they meant the "free flow of Western information" or, even more specifically, "the free flow of North-Western information." And though some member states had a rather violent reaction to the New World Information and Communications Order, and others dismissed the concept of cultural hegemony as mere abstraction, it cannot be denied that the information and communications conglomerates have been used for other services. Before his death in 1988, Sean MacBride wrote, "Control of the media, written and electronic, is of vital importance to those who wish to destabilize a government or create tensions in different parts of the world." Librarianship can play a role in this arena. The current issue of *Library Journal* has a letter from a disgruntled librarian who complains that the profession should not applaud those who make available to the public any materials that could undermine "national security." We have too many sad memories of what is done in the name of "national security": Iran and Guatemala in the 1950's; the Congo, Vietnam, Brazil, Indonesia and the

Dominican Republic in the 1960's; Chile and Angola in the 1970's; Nicaragua throughout the 1980's, and so many others far too numerous to mention here today. Librarians in the United States have a responsibility to provide access to and dissemination of any materials that pertain to such disgusting activities. If U.S. Secretary of State James Baker states that the United States will provide "electoral and political advice" to South Africa by way of the National Endowment for Democracy, it is a librarian's duty to provide information pertaining to the history and activities of that structure. If a librarian had information on activities that may be happening in the Caprivi Strip right now, it is their job to make such information available.

In closing, I ask that member states, especially those from the Non-Aligned Movement, encourage the development of a New Information Order in the new South Africa. Those in your countries who have actively participated in democratising your information and communications sectors should establish and maintain relations with relevant bodies of the liberation movement. Your national library structures should establish relations with the new library structure in South Africa that I have described above.

The people of South Africa are working day and night to achieve their liberation. But the adversaries of liberation are also working around the clock. It is crucial that we each act, in our professional capacities, to fully support the liberation movement of the African National Congress in stopping the seeds of destabilization from taking root. Data, documentation, information and knowledge - these are the tools with which we can expose such criminal activities. I might also mention that the Special Political Committee performs a great service in providing non-diplomatic personnel with a forum. The victories we have scored in the field of librarianship are in large part due to the opportunity you gave us last year. We hope to return next year to report more accomplishments. Thank you.

LIWO's Guiding Principles

LIWO recognizes:

- the inalienable right of every person to participate in the free and equal exchange of information;
- the right of library and information workers to collect, store and distribute information freely and without interference;
- that everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression and that this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers;