

M.R. I was born on the 23rd July, 1956 in Johannesburg. 1

J.F. Were your folks working there then?

M.R. Ja, my father was actually - they got married in Johannesburg, and my dad was working in Johannesburg at the time.

J.F. But - and did your parents have any kind of political outlook that affected you - any kind of influence on your politics?

M.R. No, not really - my dad was an immigrant, and my mother in fact - they met here - families weren't really political at all - my mother's family I subsequently found out had been quite political, but we never picked that up at all until long after we were involved.

J.F. So they were born in Greece or something?

M.R. My mother was born in Greece, my dad was born in Cyprus, ja.

J.F. And they only came over?

M.R. They met here in fact.

J.F. In South Africa?

M.R. In South Africa.

J.F. And was there - what was your exposure to people who weren't white as you were growing up?

M.R. Not much - I mean we lived in a small town in the Northern Transvaal, Warmbad, which was largely Afrikaans - very small English speaking grouping, and I think two or three Greek families basically, so my contact with black people was through my - my dad's work, because he had a little shop in Warmbaths and the people who used to work for him, two or three black people, a domestic servant, and the kinds of people who came in as customers in the shop, so that was about all, and I mean the community was very racist, so there wasn't sort of anything of a - of a social nature - you know, communication on a social level.

The only, if you like, non-white type contact that I would have had was, we had an Indian community in Warmbaths outside town who were also small traders - well, they were actually quite large traders in some cases, and we had some contact with them because my dad used to trade a lot with them, so every now and then we met their kids, but very little - like my brother used to play soccer with a few of the Indian kids from outside town, so we had a little bit of contact there, but otherwise nothing really.

J.F. So do you - are there any incidents or any experiences that stand out in your mind in terms of a politicising experience or an experience that revealed racism or anything in your background that you look back on now, or attitudes generally there that you think had any effect on getting you to think about things, or did you not think about things till later?

M.R. Not at - not at school, and not really - not really living in Warmbaths - the only thing that may have had a bit of an impact was basically when I got to - to high school - I actually went to high school in Pretoria - I was in boarding school there.

M.R. And it's a strange kind of thing but there was quite a - a sort of prejudiced atmosphere there against not so much black, white thing at all - in fact it was - it was more a kind of Anglo-Saxon versus the rest thing (Laugh) so there - there were a few of us - a couple of Jewish kids, some Portuguese kids and - and myself, as a Greek, in the boarding house who were kind of the outcasts within that community, and the rest were sort of fairly Anglo-Saxon background - I mean it was basically British or old South African families, and they quite arrogant and quite sort of demeaning of anybody who didn't come from the same kind of background or who didn't have the same sort of, I suppose, way of existing, Holidays - there were a whole range of different sort of small ways in which it came out, and it actually meant that those of us who were sort of outside of that sort of clubbed together a lot and ja, it -

I mean thinking back about that there - there was a real resentment of that sort of rejection and the sort of arrogance of setting themselves up as something superior because of a particular type of background, but it certainly wasn't a black, white thing at that stage at all - I never came into - again at school I never came into contact with black people, except again as servants or employees or whatever.

J.F. So when did you start thinking politically - when did that start happening?

M.R. Well, I went to university in Johannesburg at Wits, and when I got to university I - well, I had from - from the time when we were kids we had a sort of a nominal Catholic background - we used to go to church with my folks, so when I got to university they had a Catholic student society there, and at first I didn't really get involved, but somebody came round to visit me and they sort of said: Come along and see what it's like and - and it was really through that, getting involved with - with the Catholic student society at Wits that I started thinking about social and political issues, and it didn't start off as a black, white thing at all - it actually started off as trying to understand what Christianity or Catholicism, if you like, actually meant in a social context - whether it had anything to say about living, about earning money, about how we responded to other people - it was a thing about relationships - and then of course a lot of stuff about South Africa, kind of society we lived in, and it was that - that process of sort of questioning that actually got me thinking about political issues.

But it started off as a kind of reflection on lifestyles, on our personal responses to what we were looking for in life, what we were committed to, careers, if you like - were we actually involved in things simply in order to make a career for ourselves to the exclusion of - of worrying about other people or about the society in which we lived or - and a lot of that I mean it was - there were some fairly intense discussions - people coming in to give talks - small discussion group type things, and it was really that I mean exploring if one was to be committed to any kind of Christian framework, what did that actually mean in terms of the rest of your life.

It was quite a radical thing for me because I mean I had grown up in a context that my dad was a small trader and was very keen to make sure that we got educated in order that we didn't have to go through a fairly difficult experience of trying to make a living, because I mean my dad on average I mean used to work about 15, 16 hours a day every day - I mean there were no really holidays - we never went away on holiday because the shop was always open, so there wasn't any possibility of that.

M.R. And we used to work in the shop as well and I mean there was a real experience of, you know, having to struggle in order to make your living and to remain independent and to sort of have a way of surviving and fairly comfortable life, and education was supposed to be the way out of that and the folks - my folks actually really stressed that - so I went to university basically feeling that I wanted to become an engineer in order to be able to - not so much to do engineering, but in order to have a kind of meal ticket, to be able to go into business, to be able to live comfortably and to make a fair amount of money.

And there was a real sense in which you had to sort of struggle to survive, if you like, or to make - to get beyond the stage where you would have to work hell of a long hours in order to just live comfortably - so when I got there I mean there was a very strong commitment to - and a kind of individualist thing, a sort of competitive thing as well, and a very strong sort of emphasis on needing to make it because I had to make money, and it was in order to make money so that my family could - I mean that's what we got from our folks.

So when (Laugh) in - in the sort of Catholic environment people started questioning that sort of thing and saying : Well, you know, we need to think beyond and we need to - to consider the society in which we live, and that some people are more privileged than others and they have more advantages - and it was a very foreign thing to me - I mean it was - I'd grown with a thing of you make your chances, you fight for what you can get and you - I didn't feel particularly privileged, the kind of background we had, and it was a really foreign thing to start thinking in terms which said that you don't just think about your future or your career or your choices in life in terms of yourself, but in terms of being committed to other things - worrying about what happens to other people - maybe choosing a direction in life which is not necessarily just dependent on your own personal desires.

So that was very difficult for me - in fact I was (Laugh) in the history of (.....) when I first got involved - I was one of the people that ended up arguing very strongly against some of the things that people were putting across there, because they were trying to sort of introduce a much more social outlook and they were questioning what they used to call capitalist ethics or very individualistic ethics or competitive ethics, and we had long debates and I mean I always used to argue for the other side and just say : Well, it makes sense, it's the kind of society in which we live in and there wasn't anything wrong with it - so we had long debates about that type of - of orientation, and it was more on that sort of level - it was lifestyles, it was what are you striving for, what are you committed to than - well, in the beginning, than a kind of racial thing in South Africa.

And it was - it was quite a fundamental challenge to me because it was - it was the kinds of things that I'd grown up believing in, and it was - it was trying to move away from sort of thinking about making it myself to well, what does it actually mean to be somebody who's committed to different kinds of principles - if Christianity meant being - living in a different kind of way, what does that mean in terms of my own personal responsibility, and it was a real struggle for me to actually overcome that, and took quite a long time, but in the end that's the way in which I was introduced to a lot of those issues, and of course it - it - it - there was a lot of stuff on South Africa too, because we would then talk about well, if - if one is - is to be striving for the kind of world where you can live very closely, much more in contact with the sort of

M.R. people around you, much less distance, more sort of open to each other, more community oriented, if you like, then all sorts of things come into question - I mean not just the sort of individualistic competitive thing but also racial prejudices - ways of looking at different people, not really understanding people around you - and that's really how I got into racial issues - even then it was a struggle because I'd grown up with a lot of prejudices, same as any other white South African, and then it was working through those, you know, so it's kind of having a sort of what - what a lot of us thought of as a good attitude, you know - sort of we were Christians and we - we didn't sort of hate anybody and we would live kind of decently and we would - we would treat people well.

But then all the - the kind of accumulated prejudices, the ways of understanding things, the ways of seeing black people, the ways of understanding the - the - what was then known as the terrorist onslaught in South Africa, all exactly the same - we'd grown up with the same thing as anybody else, so it was a real slow process of slowly working through some of those things and trying to understand what they meant.

J.F. What do you think got you past that early stage of fighting and saying well - you can - certainly your father can justify that way - quite important values and Catholic values - how did you transcend from and get past that - was it just a process or was there any particular experience or organisation thing you went through that opened up so that you began to reject that?

M.R. There were a lot of different things - I mean some of them were looking at the implications of living that way for the whole community, for the way in which we relate to other people, for the kinds of barriers that people have against each other - I mean the whole thing of what I'd really accepted and internalised was a way of life which meant that you fight against everybody else in order to make whatever you can for yourself and your family, and that that was a problem - I mean if you extirpate () that, look at that in - in broader social terms, or what that means in terms of people's relationships to each other and how you - you really end up then being very alienated from other people, basically fighting them - not being able to trust people, not really coming close to them.

Those sorts of implications were part of what - what - what made me kind of rethink that - plus there was the fact that I felt quite committed to Christianity and I was trying to explore what that actually meant in the context, and it - it actually challenged (?) a lot of the things that I just accepted before as being perfectly reasonable ethical ways of surviving or living - I mean I didn't think there was anything wrong with those types of - of values in the past - but exploring some of the things, and also coming into contact with, as I say, various discussions about the situation, which helped me to overcome some of the prejudices.

I mean I remember one experience when Father Smangaliso Mkhathshwa came (Laugh) to address CathSoc, and he was talking about the - the war on the borders, and he was talking about young South Africans leaving and it - it raised a whole series of different questions - I mean first of all the whole concept of young South Africans actually having left because of an unjust system, and fighting on the borders basically because they wanted to change the society was totally foreign to me and I - I couldn't accept what he said.

M.R. I mean I just found it very, very strange - I'd always grown up with a thing of, you know, first of all that the people outside were basically fighting were outsiders and were coming to sort of take over South Africa - that's what I'd grown up with and there didn't seem to be any reason to believe any differently - and secondly the whole concept of the - the sort of communist threat, which he also very - I mean it didn't just come up in his talk - it was a whole range (?) of discussions - but it came up and we had a lot of discussion about that as well - was that a big threat to us, to our way of life, to the kinds of values that I'd grown up with - and I remember incidents like that when there was a big challenge to me.

At the time I mean I had already sort of worked through certain things and I - I kind of felt that I was - I was more open to black people, although I'd never really met many black people at that point, and certainly not on a social level - so I caught in a strange kind of double bind because I felt that I - I didn't want him to think that I was a kind of prejudiced white, you know, but on the other hand I didn't agree with him at all, so we had a huge argument (Laugh) and I remember feeling quite torn about it afterwards because I wasn't sure - I mean I thought I mean here's a guy who's had certain experiences, he understands things differently to what I do, and it was quite clear that he basically thought we were just young white South Africans who kind of didn't know what was going on type of thing.

And I was a bit insulted by that but I was also quite challenged by it because there was at least the possibility that a lot of my opinions were just due to kind of prejudiced background. I mean that's just a small thing, but there were a lot of things like that - discussions we went through, kind of soul searching experiences, if you like, because there was a lot of emphasis on looking at our own attitudes, what are the sort of things we're committed to, what kind of lifestyle are we going to live, what did our career choices mean - and it was through those types of discussions that I started questioning a lot of the stuff, and in fact became introduced to political issues largely through that.

I mean it started of on a - on a fairly, if you like, ethical or personal basis - what kind of things are you personally committed to, what sort of values should govern your life choices, if you like, and then went on to well, what implications does that have for the kind of social system in which we live economically and politically - what did it mean in terms of South African situation, in terms of apartheid, and it really grew from that - also of course I had a lot of - afterwards I had quite a lot more contact with black Catholic students and - and that carried the process on.

You know, we used to talk to each other and - and again it was a - a fairly difficult process - a lot of the guys just felt that, you know, wasn't much point in talking to whites - it was the beginning of the sort of BC era - that was about '75 - and a lot of the guys were very scathing - I had a strange kind of dual response to that - I mean some of my friends who were quite liberal had grown up in fairly liberal - from a fairly liberal background, you know, in families where their - their parents spoke about this kind of thing - were quite apologetic when faced with accusing young black people who basically said : You know, you whites are kind of just domineering and we don't really want to be in the same organisations as you - we don't want to sort of - you've just kind of messed things up for us, and O.K., it's fine that you now questioning things - but you know, there was a kind of distance involved.

M.R. There was a don't sort of presume that you now part of the struggle type of thing, although we didn't express them in those terms at that point, but I - I never had that - I mean I - I didn't feel guilty about it - I mean I was actually exploring new things for me and it was - it was a - quite a wrenching experience in terms of trying to change my own commitment, but there wasn't a kind of personal apology for what I'd kind of done before, so I - it was a mixed response in the sense that I - I couldn't understand why they were being so what came across to me as fairly arrogant, you know - I mean the guys were just saying : Well, not really terribly interested in talking to you and besides you part of this whole system which is a big problem - whereas for me it was a different thing.

It was kind of having gone through a lot of questioning what I'd been committed to before and feeling like O.K., maybe I can be committed to this new direction but I need to understand more about it - it was - it was a sort of questioning thing, you know - talk to me about it, tell me what's going on, help me to understand these things - and if a guy just got heavy or didn't want to talk to me well, I thought it was a bit strange but it didn't - it didn't make me feel kind of rejected and very guilty or whatever.

And it was quite interesting, that whole background because it - I remember various conferences that we went to where some of the black students or the speakers who came engendered quite a - a sort of sense of crisis in the whole conference, because the guy would actually basically challenge people in terms of what they had done and where they'd been and - and as whites in South Africa what did it mean for themselves, what did it mean for the country, and it was - it was quite an attack in a way on - although they - they were there to try and help people understand certain social issues or maybe how a black Christian feels about particular things, it actually ended up being quite an attack on people's just feelings about themselves, and it engendered this huge sense of crisis where people were sort of feeling well, what are we doing in this country, what are we doing at all - I mean are we - are we kind of worthwhile people - and a lot of those types of experiences are (?) really emotional kind of traumatic soul searching thing - that's what helped to change a lot of other people as well - it was that sort of environment that - that I came through.

J.F. And this is all - you're talking about '75, '76, later than that?

M.R. Ja, it was sort of late '74, '75 - bit later on in 1976 I got more involved in campus politics - up to that time I mean although we were on campus as a Catholic student society and we sort of knew what was happening in terms of some of the political gatherings, we didn't have that much contact with people who were the sort of left on campus - the people who were committed to politics - and it was only really in 1976, the beginning of the year, that a few of us got more involved.

I remember I got - I got involved in Rag - I don't know if you know what Rag is - well, it was a fund raising thing, you know - it was - it was a big sort of social occasion for most students, and it was supposed to be a way of having fun and raising money for poor people type of thing - now I went into it as a sort of someone who came out of the - the background I've just described now, and sort of felt committed to let's try and make something of it - let's try and help to sort of raise funds.

M.R. So I went and joined and I undertook to help organise a - a particular region of Jo'burg to sell this magazine that they sell at that time of year at Wits (?) which is basically the biggest fund raising exercise there because you sell them for about a rand each and they cost about twenty cents to print, so the sale of those magazines was fairly important to the whole fund raising effort.

And I got involved in it and it was - it was quite a - a wrenching experience there as well because that particular year there was a big issue about the fact that the Rag people had decided that one of the beneficiaries that were going to receive the money that we raised was the Southern Cross Border Fund, which at the time I mean I didn't know much about it and I - the issue was actually raised by some of the SRC people on campus, and they made quite a big fuss about it.

Now the Rag people were very defensive, and there was a kind of obviously a major split - the people involved in Rag were fairly liberal but not very political and quite defensive of their - their general orientation - not really very political - so when this kind of big challenge came from the SRC most of the people acted very defensively, and in fact there was a huge crisis on campus - people discussing this - what's going to happen.

And it came as a challenge to me when I discovered it and listened a little bit to - you know, to what people were saying, began to realise what the implications were of giving money to - to a Southern Cross Border Fund, and in fact sympathised with the criticisms that people were making of Rag - there was a huge mass meeting on campus where some of the people that I actually quite respected - I mean people who were quite committed to raising funds for people through this Rag effort, ended up behaving really badly - I mean they - they basically mobilised very ordinary students who had no idea of what the issues were, who hadn't really thought it through, who were basically feeling that Rag is being challenged or threatened by these sort of mad lefties - now we must go there and defend Rag.

And I mean really it was an exercise in shouting each other down - there was this big mass meeting - the SRC people were addressing it from the stage - a Rag person also got a chance to address the meeting, but the Rag chairman has basically brought all these groupies along - I mean he had sort of the first ten rows of the great hall were filled with sort of young drummers and - and people who - male students as well who were just - had no idea of the issues at all - they were there to cheer the Rag chairman regardless, and they were there to defend him against these sort of lefties, and it was -

It was actually quite a traumatic experience for me because I thought to myself well, this guy's not making any attempt to actually take the issue seriously - he's going up there and he's basically - he made a kind of a rah-rah speech, you know - Rag is doing great things - ignored the issues entirely - the chap on the other side who spoke was Patrick Fitzgerald - he didn't impress me much either - he was very arrogant and kind of sneering of the possibility of anybody thinking of giving money to such a thing and - but it was quite clear that he was correct and the others weren't.

And it was also quite a big turning point for me because I - I actually then decided that I couldn't carry on and I wrote a letter of resignation to the Rag committee and just said : Sorry, I actually can't continue, and these are my reasons and you know, I really don't feel that I can if - if Rag is to continue in this way.

M.R. And it was funny because they took it quite seriously - they - they didn't sort of say well, you know, stuff you, you another sort of (?) mad lefty - the guy - the chairman actually came and spoke to me and he was in a way much more reasonable than he had come across in the mass meeting, but it was quite clear that there was a big threatened feeling and that he wasn't prepared to - well, in that environment he wasn't prepared to let Rag be threatened and he was just going to react defensively.

And I mean it wasn't - it wasn't a big problem for me - it wasn't as if he said to me, you know, you crazy and you just letting us down, whatever - we discussed it and he said he could understand some of the things that I felt, and if that was the way I felt that was O.K. - but you know, I mean I'd done it - not sort of dumped the thing and left - I'd actually organised the whole thing and basically handed it over to somebody else to sort of take over.

But it was quite a big turning point again because it made me start realising that it wasn't just a matter of individual issues but it was also a matter of getting through to people - it was a matter of trying to - I mean we'd done that in - in - in the Catholic context - a lot of our work obviously what - what - I had been through what other people were going through was trying to get people to work through their blocks or prejudices to recommit themselves to different kinds of values, different orientations, open up their understanding of political issues and social issues etc., but I hadn't really seen it in a broader political context - I mean I hadn't seen it on campus at all - didn't realise the kind of different alignment of forces.

There I saw that, for example, Rag doing some good things and yet controlled by people who weren't really very political, and that nothing really was being done about that - there was a huge divide between that and the SRC - and that was when I decided to stand for the SRC after that trauma - we also had a - a similar battle in CathSoc where we took the same issue back to the council, and I was actually on the council committee at that time.

We discussed it and we tried to get people to understand that it was important for us to withdraw from Rag because of the issues at stake, but of course a lot of our people were just ordinary Catholic students, and although at the - during the first meeting we had most of the people supported us, they decided that we should have a proper meeting of the Catholic Society in order to take a proper decision.

We didn't handle the meeting very well, but anyway for whatever reason we actually lost when it came to a vote - I actually put the motion that we should withdraw from Rag, and I think I was the vice chairman of the CathSoc at the time and Tom Waspe was the chair - and people said no, they were not prepared to, and we got voted down, and at that point I resigned from the committee and said well, I couldn't actually continue because it was quite clear that the direction of the CathSoc at least for the next few months would be quite closely geared to the Rag effort, because that was the sort of main orientation for the next couple of months, and that I couldn't actually remain on the committee.

In fact most of the committee resigned at that point, but a lot of them restood for elections and kind of continued.

M.R. I basically then left and decided to stand for the SRC - and then I mean in a way that was my first exposure to left wing politics on campus, although I - I'd been to meetings and I'd sort of met people, it wasn't a very close acquaintance. I stood for the SRC in a by-election - some people had - I don't know, I think they'd left university or something, so there were three positions - but it was also at a time when the right wing was challenging NUSAS on campus, and what it - what actually happened was there was a referendum as to whether Wits should remain affiliated to NUSAS or not, because the right - the right wing students were basically saying that NUSAS was this left wing clique and that it was - it was wrong for their (.....) to be linked to it because of its political direction and that the mass of students now need a voice, and that they should actually vote that their - there was also a bit of an argument about whether the SRC was actually controlled by the students - although it was actually elected by the students, the right wing students felt that very few students ever voted for elections, and so it was a small grouping of left students that voted the SRC in.

Then the SRC got involved in NUSAS, and again it was just the left wing clique, and they were trying to get the students to vote against it - so that referendum actually aroused a hell of a lot of interest because it was exact - when people went to vote for who should be on the SRC they were also voting yes or no on the issue affiliation to NUSAS, and so it was a fairly politically charged campaign - I mean we had to go round talk to classes - it was my first contact with just ordinary students I mean apart from the sort of Catholic student environment that I'd been in before, and discussing political issues with those students and -

And I think there were something like 12 people standing for three positions - again that was - it's not indicative of what normally happens in elections - it was just because it was such a politically charged election - and we won - we won the referendum, and I actually got onto the SRC and then for the first time started having contact with a lot of the - the ordinary left wing students, if you like - it was a very strange experience, because they were very, very different.

I mean in the Catholic student society I was used to a fairly tightly knit community where people were - worked quite hard to try and ensure that everybody had a chance to explore some of the issues that - the sort of blocks and the - the prejudices and the ill-feeling that a lot of these issues sometimes arise, you know, when people discuss them, were overcome - that people worked quite hard at that - whereas what I walked into on the SRC was a totally different environment.

I mean it was - it was a very left wing SRC, and incredibly alienating - I mean people were not - didn't seem to really understand ordinary students at all - they were kind of a committed left wing clique basically (Laugh) - I mean that's what it struck me as as well when I got onto the SRC.

J.F. (.....) some of the office-bearers there?

M.R. Well, Patrick Fitzgerald was on that SRC - a chap called Mike Mandelawiz (?) got on the by-election with me - he'd been a previous SRC president - Richard de Villiers was on that SRC - Jeremy Georgiades, who was a slightly different character from the rest, he was a - a chap who had been the debating society chairman - in fact was very popular on campus - he used to - he introduced in fact a sort of a general debating society atmosphere for the first time to the broad mass of students on campus.

M.R. What he used to do was he used to - he had a public address system and speakers, and he used to take the debates to the students, so he'd set it up on the lawn where just ordinary students were kind of sitting around having their lunch or something and he (Laugh) - he would start a topic and say : Right, today we going to debate this topic - and he'd walk up to students and say : What do you think (Laugh) - kind of shove the microphone into their face - it was - it was amazing - he actually generated quite a good atmosphere on the campus generally, but he got to be very well known - I mean they would discuss all sorts of things - not just political topics, although he also was - was quite committed to certain political topics - but he got elected SRC president partly as a kind of compromise, because the left wing - the sort of more committed left wing students weren't too keen on him, and the more liberal students weren't too keen on the left wing students, so there was a bit of a split - in the end they compromised and they elected Jimmy in - he in any case topped the poll - I mean the actual elections he got the highest number of votes - so that was the sort of SRC I walked onto, but the majority of those students, as I say, were - were pretty committed left wing students - that's how they came across when I first sort of - and the kinds of issues we discussed there were certainly not indicative of - of the - the general understanding or the general level of - of politicisation of white students on the campus.....

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J.F. So you found it - did you find it hard to get used to, to get involved in the left wing politics given that cliquy atmosphere or did you get past it pretty easily, or what was your experience?

M.R. Well, my immediate response was that these people were not going to have much influence on ordinary students, because there's no way that an ordinary student who comes onto a campus with the same kind of background as most of us had as white South Africans would ever be able to relate to the sorts of issues that they were talking about, and there wasn't the kind of atmosphere that could draw the person in on some other basis and then slowly get introduced to these issues - it was really a matter of you either responded or you didn't.

J.F. What year was that?

M.R. That was 19 - that was beginning of 1976 - it was about March, 1976. Anyway I got involved - tried to understand a lot of what was going on - I was actually more drawn to Jimmy because I felt that he was someone who at least could get through to ordinary students - he'd made a serious attempt to try and get just the average white student to think about political issues, and although he wasn't that clear politically - that was also quite obvious, by the way - I mean he - his political understanding certainly wasn't that of - of some of the others on that SRC.

M.R. And some of them certainly knew a hell of a lot more about South Africa, understood perhaps more of the dynamics at play than he did - the thing about him was that he could actually get through to ordinary students - he could just go and chat to them - he - he was popular, so he had an opening which the others didn't have - they just didn't have that access, so in a lot of ways it meant that although their - their politics was correct, their possibility of influencing ordinary white students was very minimal, specially compared to his.

So we had a lot of conflict on that SRC, but of course we were plunged into a fairly complex political situation later on that year, because that was June, 1976, and we were suddenly thrust into a situation where the students in - in the - in the townships started these huge protests, and we were then faced with trying to respond as white students on a university campus, and it was very, very difficult and traumatic, and I mean of course as the SRC we were supposed to be giving some sort of leadership on the - on the issue.

And I mean we responded a bit haphazardly, quite confused in a way, and feeling quite helpless because although many of us were quite committed to trying to do something about what was going on, it was quite clear that the arena was certainly not in town - it wasn't in the white areas - it was in the townships themselves. We had a number of mass meetings and in fact there was a - a big march through town - I think it was actually on the 17th., after we'd first got the news about what was happening in Soweto - people getting shot, students getting killed, sort of mass - in a kind of way a mass uprising.

We had a big mass meeting on campus and then people said that they wanted to march through town to protest at what was happening, so as the SRC I mean we basically organised it and off we went and we - because we were - there was such a panic amongst sort of police, army circles everybody - I mean generally the focus of attention was on Soweto because that was what was blowing up and most of the police and the army were there, so they didn't really - when we first started they didn't try and stop us - there weren't really enough police around to try and make a sort of a major confrontation - I don't think they really expected anything to happen in town - and when we started marching we walked right through town from Wits - it was quite a big sort of rout - we picked up literally thousands of people on the way, because what happened to us was as we were marching through a lot of ordinary black people would see us going, and of course people had posters and they were shouting slogans and -

And remember at that time there weren't the proportion of black students on campus that there are now - they were a very small percentage and they weren't really involved in any of these kind of political issues - they generally stayed out of it entirely and kind of did their own thing, so it was - it was generally white students and - but a lot of the ordinary black people in town who would see us I mean obviously knew what was happening in the townships and felt this was something they could (.....) with maybe just walk - obviously a lot of other people were just curious, so they would just join in.

M.R. Anyway the end result of that was, although we started off from Wits with about maybe four or five hundred students, we finished the circular rout coming into Braamfontein with probably about two to three thousand people walking down the - the sort of main street, obviously creating an incredible disruption - at that point we had motor cycle traffic police riding behind us, so (?) we keeping the traffic back and trying to control things - I was walking right at the back because we were trying to get all the students to stay together - they didn't get spread out and they wouldn't have problems - and there were also motor cycle police in the front.

And I mean another thing happened which in a way also helped to shape a lot of our - our feelings about involvement in politics in South Africa, and that was that - well, it later emerged that what had happened was the news about the march sort of broke out in various areas around Jo'burg - the news travelled very, very quickly - and I remember this march probably took over an hour and maybe closer to two hours in total, and various lecturers at the Wits Technicon, which was a kind of trade school in town - the particular sections that dealt with the mechanics and the electricians and what not - the lecturers there heard that the Wits students were marching - now there was quite a lot of antagonism between the two because they were much more right wing oriented, and a lot of the students were just ordinary white South Africans, some of them Afrikaans, some of them English speaking, but people who were going to become tradesmen, and quite antagonistic towards any idea of sort of liberation politics in South Africa - very antagonistic.

So these lecturers kind of whipped these guys up and said : The Witsies are on the march, you must go and break this thing up - and we later heard from actually one of my friends who was at Tech told me what happened - apparently this lecturer went down to the sort of mechanics class and said : Right, grab anything you can carry, iron bars, chains, pieces of wood, whatever, we're going to go and get these guys - and they in fact hit the march in Braamfontein - we were within a block of Wits again - we were actually just marching straight back to Wits, and they came from behind - there must have been about ag, not more than about 100 of them, I think, but they were all armed with some or other, and they came from behind which -

Remember it's a huge crowd just sort of marching down the road and there's a lot of confusion - I mean you can't coordinate such a big thing and - so what they did is they came running from behind and they just started hitting people from the back, and of course the back people got really scared and started running, and so it just kind of sowed panic into the entire march - nobody knew what was going on, whether it was police or what was going - I was right at the back of course - I was one of the first to get clobbered, but it - it - it was very difficult for anybody to do anything to sort of calm people down, and the whole thing just disrupted into people running, fights in the streets, people getting clubbed - a couple of these Tech students actually got stabbed, because some of the black people in the - in the crowd weren't going to sort of stand and get clubbed, and I mean they had knives or whatever on them, so they fought back and some of these guys actually ended up in hospital.

But a lot of other people - ordinary black workers who had just joined our march in town, and a lot of the white students got - got quite badly hurt - not very bad - I mean I had one particular scene sticks in my mind because I got knocked down right at the start, but they just ran straight past - they just knocked a few of us down at the back and then (.....) and of course panic ensued.

M.R. Then I got up and I sort of ran forward to try and see what - what I could do, and there was a particular student who sort of looked like a kind of hippie leftie - he had long hair and was kind of wearing his jeans and - and he was trying to appeal to this one Tech student and he was saying to the guy : Listen, we marching peacefully, we don't want to fight, you know - and while he was talking to this guy - this was about a yard away from me - this guy just clubbed him on the head with an iron bar - I mean he was literally talking to the guy sort of trying to reason with him, and the guy's response was just to sort of smack him on the head with this iron bar, and I (?) obviously just dropped - wasn't very badly hurt, but it was just the sort of shock of that kind of really brutal and violent response - it was a new thing to a lot of us.

We hadn't really encountered that type of thing - I mean we had some problems from the police in the past, but nothing really quite so dramatic - and we sort of regrouped and went back to campus - eventually got some of our people out of jail (Laugh) - I think only one person was actually arrested in the end - by the way, the police that were there were just standing and watching - I mean they weren't interested in trying to stop it or.

In fact what happened with one particular instance which I also witnessed was one of our guys saw somebody being beaten up on the side - I think one or two Tech students were actually beating up a - a small - smallish white student, and he kind of rushed up and just laid into these guys - he was quite a big guy - booted the one guy and then just sort of smacked the other guy, and the cops then arrested him - it was the only guy (Laugh) they arrested in the entire march, and they chucked him into the van.

Anyway he was eventually let out so it wasn't such a major problem, but essentially their attitude was let these guys get beaten up, you know, but if any of them seem to be fighting back to hard then stop that - we then sort of regrouped and went back to the campus, and later on that morning some of us were actually meeting with the vice chancellor of SRC people to try and arrange to get that particular person out of jail and just find out whether anybody else was in jail, and also to discuss what we were going to do because it was obviously a big crisis point at that point - we weren't sure what was going to happen on campus.

He was very worried that, you know we were going to have rioting on the campus itself - and while we were there discussing things with him another group of students actually marched again, but this time they - they sort of left the campus and they went and they were stopped by the police about one kilometer further on, and the police said : We're not letting you through, you got to go back to the campus - and then I don't know exactly what happened, but I think they had police dogs there, and so people just sort of ran to try and get away because they - they let the police dogs loose and they started chasing people - they gave them a couple of minutes to disperse and then - then started chasing them, and again there were incidents which sort of stuck in the minds of a lot of the Wits students where some of them ran towards a - a railway goods yard to try and get away from the police, and a lot of the white railway workers were waiting on the other side, and these people were trying to climb the fence to get away from the police, and the railway workers started throwing stones at them from the other side, and there was this kind of horrific scene.

M.R. It was actually shown on TV that night - of a young white woman student who was hit by a stone on the head and there was kind of blood pouring down her face and she was trying to sort of get away, scramble over the fence, and a number of other students were also hurt, and the police just kind of dragged them all away - eventually they were all released, but that obviously had quite a big impact on all of us.

From there I - I mean there was a lot of trauma during that time to try to work out ways of responding and what we were going to do, and there were discussions about somehow generating some kind of solidarity action with the students in Soweto, because it became quite clear within days that there was a kind of major war situation on the go in Soweto and the - the army and the police were basically occupying the township and that people were getting killed every day, and it was very, very difficult for us to work out what we should do, how we should respond and -

As it happened I - I actually didn't stay on campus much longer because even at that point I had been sort of rethinking my career options, if you like, because I had - I was doing engineering and I had a bursary from Anglo-American which committed me to going to work for them after I left for two years, and it was quite clear that I mean the path was all set out - I was going to finish my engineering degree, I'd have to go to the army, I would have to go and work for Anglo-American for two years, so everything was - and I'd questioned that quite fundamentally as part of the sort of discussions we'd had within CathSoc, and was very unsure about whether I wanted to be an engineer - pretty sure I didn't want to be an engineer working for Anglo-American, and was quite sure that I didn't want to go to the army at that point, and wasn't sure how I was going to get out of all of that - I seemed to be sort of trapped.

And eventually the way I responded was I - I decided to drop out of engineering and university at that point in order to try and sort of get out of this - this sort of bursary thing and being committed to work for them etc. - so I think it was about mid July same year, '76, I basically went to Anglo and said I didn't want to continue and I was thinking of going back to university but I wanted to do an arts degree and I had sort of changed my orientation - and I was quite lucky in the sense that they just let me off - they didn't make me pay back the money and they just said : O.K., we'll let you off your obligations - I mean they've got thousands of bursary students and it's not a big thing for them.

So I then left and I went to work for a while, just various jobs to try and earn a bit of money for the rest of (?) that year, and then went back to university the following year to - to - I registered for a BA, and I majored in political science and sociology.

J.F. This was what year that you went back?

M.R. That was '77 - and from there on I mean it was - I was then - of course I'd left - I wasn't really involved in student politics for the rest of that year, and when I went back to university it was kind of getting reintroduced to it, and eventually at the end of 1977 I stood for the SRC again - the elections were in October or whatever, and I got elected again, and of course I was much more involved in student activity at that point - I got involved in a whole range of different things on campus.

M.R. And that's where a lot of my more overt political involvement and involvement in student politics really came from - although I'd had that sort of previous four or five months in '76, I had had a very big exposure to it, and at that time I mean what we were trying to do was to in a way resuscitate the SRC because there'd been quite a big crisis after what had happened to us in '76, and the SRC had - there - there'd been a lot of internal bickering as well, partly political differences and partly just chaos and the people were not sure what to do or where to go, and the SRC actually collapsed, so this was the first new SRC after that.

There'd been like a management committee for a year or so in between, and we were trying to sort of restart and - and try and find ways of reaching the mass of students, and we had a new constitution and some new structures as well, and it was a very difficult thing - I mean it was an attempt to sort of - some of the things were actually going on in NUSAS at the same time - it was an attempt to sort of get to the broad mass of students in whatever way we could.

Quite big differences amongst us - I mean I, having come from the background that I did, I felt that a lot of the methods and the approach that people used on the SRC type level were just alienating to ordinary students, and they would never get through to the mass of ordinary students, and at best we would get through to people who came from liberal backgrounds who were sort of open to politics, maybe because their parents had sort of introduced them to things and maybe they would move a little bit further.

But ordinary students, and particularly ones who came from fairly right wing backgrounds would never be - well, not on a large scale - would never really be - be challenged and be able to relate to some of the things that people were involved in - but we tried - I mean we tried a whole range of different approaches and methods to - to get people involved, and so I - that year I was first projects officer and then vice president.

In the end, because I was vice president, I got involved in a lot of administrative stuff, which was quite unsatisfying - it was kind of making sure the SRC worked and representation on committees and a lot of just administrative work with - with the admin and with the university council, which actually in the end made me decide that it wasn't - there wasn't much point in working on that level and that I should actually get involved in different levels on campus.

So the following year there was quite a lot of pressure because there weren't many of us who were restanding for the new SRC, and generally what happens is some of the executive - there's the broad SRC and the executive committee's a group of about six people, and it's generally expected that somebody from the executive committee or a couple of people from the executive committee restand, and one of those people would generally be the new president because they have experience from the old things - so there was a lot of pressure on me to stand to take over as president, but I wasn't keen to stand for the SRC at all, and we managed to persuade another executive member and he in fact took over.

J.F. Who was that?

M.R. Clifford Goldsmith - he's a doctor now.

M.R. And I didn't stand for the SRC at all the following year - I got involved on a whole range of different levels on campus.

J.F. What year was - what following year was that?

M.R. That was '78 - well, that was - the election in '77 that I stood for the period - term of office was October, '77 to October, '78 - I mean in terms of political understanding and - and general involvement I suppose one of the things that also influenced me a lot was I then spent a lot of time studying politics, industrial sociology - I mean I'd had a - I was coming out of a - a feeling of - of needing to understand those issues of commitment to trying to work for change in South Africa at that point, so I was studying them from that perspective, but also introduced me to some new issues - particularly things like industrial sociology, where we spent such a lot of time trying to understand trade unions and the role of workers.

That was maybe the first time that I'd spent a lot of time thinking about that kind of thing - obviously generally in terms of the kinds of politics that I was exploring I'd felt that sort of the majority of poor people needed to become involved in some sort of process of struggle and were involved in the process of struggle, and that we needed to identify with them in that process - try and find a way of - of becoming part of that struggle.

But the sort of - the whole trade union element - the workers struggle element, I hadn't really explored much, and it was introduced to me there more through an academic thing than anything else, which was obviously very different to the ways in which I'd been introduced to politics in the sort of general sphere.

I also began to understand there that a lot of students actually became involved in politics out of a kind of academic background, and that their commitment in a way was - wasn't actually rooted in a sort of fundamental rethink of their - their options of what they were committed to or what they were - the direction they were going in - and it was more of a sort of academic thing of having gone to university, being introduced to an intellectual understanding of say, the situation in South Africa as a whole, and slowing beginning to feel that they didn't really understand the situation before and that now they had a different understanding of it and therefore a different kind of politics was called for by them, but it was quite a sterile way of - of becoming involved and becoming committed, and I -

I mean very often it appeared that a lot of those people were actually just academically committed, if you like, rather than committed in any kind of fundamental way in terms of what it meant to them as individuals, in terms of what it meant to the sort of future course of their life - what - what were they going to do when they left university - didn't seem as if people had actually gone through a very difficult process of - of needing to sort of rechallenge or rethink your whole options - and that was very different for me because I - I had come from an environment where that was stressed a lot - that if you - you know, it wasn't a matter of just intellectually understanding a different direction - it was actually a matter of reworking your - your basic values - I mean what - what you were really committed to, the kinds of - the reason you - you went to university at all, or the reason you - you were living in South Africa at all.

- M.R. It was like an emotional choice - it was a - it was a commitment that you had to make first - the intellectual understanding was important but it was secondary, and that was very different - I mean I went into an environment where basically people were becoming politicised, if you like, largely through reading and intellectual understanding - not that some of the people were any less committed, but it was a totally different path, and in some ways a lot of the people were a hell of a lot less committed, and I mean that was evidenced by the fact that a lot of those people really dropped out later, or just became academics who were not really that involved.
- J.F. What about during that time - wasn't that the time when you developed your own personal way of living (.....) - tell me just a bit about that - what the origins of that was....
- M.R. Well, it was the same kind of thing - it was an attempt to - to sort of re-examine our personal lifestyle as white South Africans who - who came from a fairly privileged background, had access to a whole series of material props, if you like - money from our parents - quite a high standard of living - most of us had the possibility, if not the actuality of, you know, owning a car, driving around, of going out to restaurants, going to movies etc. - I mean it was a very different kind of level of living to what say, an ordinary student or a person of our age would experience in Soweto - and there was a lot of discussion about that - what did it mean for us.
- If we wanted to commit ourselves to a different kind of society shouldn't we actually be looking at our own lifestyle and trying to change that, as part of a process of committing ourselves to a different type of society, and also as part of a way of working towards that, because it was quite clear that unless whites were prepared to actually lower their standards of living in South Africa, there's no way any kind of change was going to take place.
- But it wasn't just that - it wasn't a sort of - I don't think we thought through hell of a carefully in the beginning as an overall strategy for change - it was more a let's - let's see if we can actually work through certain things in ourselves in the way in which we responded to these things - they (there) were like material props - could we live without them - could we actually have a fulfilling existence without having access to all these kind of fairly - in the South African context fairly sort of luxurious surroundings and without owning hi-fi sets and cars and etc., etc.
- So there was a whole thing about simple living, as the way people articulated at the time - and also at the same time it went with quite a strong stress on communal living - not isolating oneself off in say, a flat by yourself, or as a married couple by yourselves and sort of separate off from the rest of your society - and in a way we saw that as indicative of the - the kind of distance between people in the sort of society that we lived in, and that is was important to explore communal living and to explore living much more simply within that context, because you know, you'll be able to support each other in that as well, and by sharing things and by being much more open to other people and working through the things together we would actually be able to give each other support in exploring those things, and also because we shared things we would be able to actually exist with a much lower level of - of spending, or having access to either cars or washing machines or whatever.

M.R. And so we started a number of different communities actually, but JOCETO was the sort of main one, and it was really - it was a group of eight people - at that time it was actually mostly working people - my brother and I, Pete, were the only students that were involved - and the idea was, right from the start, that we would - we would try and live much more simply in terms of food, in terms of the sort of general environment, if you like, furniture - the kinds of things we spent money on - we'd try and re-examine things like how we spent our spare time socialising - also try and explore communal living in the sense of different ways of spending our time relating to people, creating a community atmosphere, helping to bring sort of people much closer together - and at the same time there was a political basis to it in the sense that we were all committed to change in South Africa.

Now we expressed it in different ways - there were very different people living there - some were sort of much more overtly political - politically committed, if you like - people who discussed the political situation, our understanding of it in - in sort of political party terms, in terms of the sort of overall struggle - others who expressed it in a much more personal way, and if you like, on a different scale - I mean people who are (?) involved - there was a social worker who lived with us, and I mean she felt that she was living out her political commitment, not necessarily in terms of ideologies or whatever but in terms of the way in which she responded to the people she worked with as a social worker.

We had a number of people who were quite deeply involved in the church - somebody who worked for the Christian Institute, for example, and felt that she was expressing her political commitment through that - so there were very different people - there was an engineer who lived with us - and that also ja, made quite a big difference to us - it was part of our sort of process of working through a lot of things - being able to live that way - being able to live at a much lower standard than we had all been used to - re-examining what we spent money on.

In fact from quite early on - in fact I think from about the third month that we - we lived in that house we also decided that we wanted to share our - our money in the house, and it was a bit difficult - we sort of worked into it - we weren't exactly sure how we were going to do it in the beginning, so in the beginning people sort of put money into a joint account, but they didn't necessarily put everything in, or if they had sort of savings somewhere else - I mean it wasn't, you know, sort of an overall discussion about exactly how it was going to - I mean we kind of worked through it as we went.

But we started a joint account where we, when people would get their salaries or wherever they got money from - you know, some of us were students so we didn't have salaries, but we had some form of - of subsistence allowance or income or bursaries - I had a bursary - we would put that money into the account and then we would take joint decisions on what the money should be spent on - we all had signing powers to the account, so we could technically all draw money if we wanted to, but the idea was that we would actually discuss any larger expenditure - we would keep some sort of pocket money, if you like, to spend on whatever, incidentals, and it would be a small amount, or (?) we'd try and make it a small amount.

M.R. But the idea was that we would discuss much more what we spent money on and how we actually - and it also had implications for social life obviously, because socialising was an attempt to find an alternative socialising, if you like - not necessarily going out to nightclubs or discos or say, movies every week or whatever, but trying to actually introduce a much more - we had what we called community evenings where we invite friends round - either have a discussion or there'd be singing or just kind of general socialising - it was (?) a way of exploring a range of different options.

It had quite a lot of effect on us - all those people were actually Christian involved people, and it was from that sort of background that we got together - we quite soon found out that there were quite big differences between us - that some of us, our political commitment went beyond a sort of - well, we found that we basically diverged politically - some of us although we - we - we came from the same kind of background, ended up pushing a fairly liberal kind of politics in the South African context - it was fairly individualised - I mean people were prepared to sort of change their lifestyles and they were prepared to look at things on a fairly individual level, but when it came to sort of broad social options they found it quite threatening and found it quite difficult to discuss anything that too fundamentally challenged the type of society we lived in, so in the end we actually diverged between those people who got much more deeply politically involved and were starting to explore socialism, various different ideologies in terms of the sort of overall framework for a different society, and those who were, as Christians, you could say committed to a type of socialism, but not really wanting to explore it much more - quite scared of some of the implications of that - wanting to keep it on a much more personal individual level.

When it came to political struggle, for example, a lot of people felt that the only way of changing the society was to change everybody's attitudes, and you had to work at attitude change and that was it type of thing - and when we would say : Well, it's - it's - it's a social thing, it's a structural thing, you have to organise politically - I mean you have to get involved in the process of struggle - it may involve things that you don't personally like, like the whole question of violence - a lot of the people just couldn't actually cope with that and - and couldn't internalise that.

That was also, by the way, a big thing for us - what was our attitude to violence - how would we cope with the fact that there was an armed struggle going on inside South Africa, and it was - it was again worked through not on a level of, you know, there's an armed struggle and we must understand what it is and, you know, the - the sort of historical background to it - it was more how would I respond to violence - I mean can I actually personally ethically cope with the - the - the need to respond in a particular situation and - and to include violence, if you like, amongst the range of options.

And people who come from a Christian background often find that very, very difficult, and we - we battled through that, and a lot of us were bas - basically felt that it was something that because of the - we didn't see it necessarily just as an individual thing but as a fight against injustice on a social scale - that it became necessary to actually respond in such a way as to effectively change that structure, and if that response necessitated some kind of violent process, well, that was something that we had to cope with.

M.R. And that was a very difficult thing for a lot of people and (?) a lot of the other Christians, particularly people in JOCETO, found that quite difficult to cope with, and certainly the others, a lot of others that we worked with - so that was also included as one of the things that we would always have to work through with new people coming through the CathSoc circles or, you know, whatever Christian circles we were working in - a lot of people were not students any more so they were working in a sort of wider environment.

On campus I found people dealt with issues in a very different level - it was more - it was more academic in a way - it was historical, it was trying to understand the sort of roots of the struggle - helped me a lot - I mean I was getting exposure on sort of both levels, but it was a very different way of looking at things.....

END OF SIDE TWO.

J.F. What year was JOCETO started?

M.R. 1977 - January, 1977.

J.F. And how did the name come about?

M.R. Well, we kind of - we were discussing it in the house and it - it wasn't given to the - to the house immediately, but when we moved in we had a lot of black friends coming around who used to come on a kind of social level, and one of the people who came in had a particular point (?) sort of joked and said: Well, this place looks like a - a township in the middle of town - you know, this is kind of - looks a bit like Soweto but here we are based in the middle of Jo'burg (Laugh) - so because of that somebody then coined the name JOCETO - you know SOWETO stands for South Western Township, and so this guy coined this name Johannesburg Central Township, so we got the name JOCETO.

Actually something that I - I didn't mention which also had quite an impact on my well, political development was while we were on the SRC we actually decided to try and make contact with SASO, which was based in Durban, because I mean there was all this kind of conflict - there was this confusion - we weren't sure where we were going, and we thought well, we must have contact with black students as well - there was no contact at that point between NUSAS and SASO - and we decided that we'd have to try and - and get to see them, so some of the people from the Wits SRC actually contacted the SASO headquarters in Durban and a group of four of us actually went down - myself, the president, Jimmy Georgiades, Patrick Fitzgerald and Richard de Villiers, who was the vice president, I think, at the time, and it was a really strange experience.

I mean went to these guys offices - it was quite difficult finding the place - nobody seemed to really know where the offices were.

M.R. And when we got there there was a kind of a really sort of hostile atmosphere - sort of walked up the stairs and some people sort of looked at us and we kind of explained what we'd come for because we - we hadn't had any way of contacting them in advance so we basically just turned up, and they were rather surprised obviously and they kind of kept us sitting there while a few of them discussed what we wanted, and eventually a couple of them spoke to us, and there was a real - a really kind of distant atmosphere - I mean there was a kind of feeling of who are you guys coming here just sort of barging in coming to talk to us about the problems in South Africa - I mean here we involved in a sort of major political struggle - you don't know anything about it - what do you want anyway type of thing.

And one of the students was actually trying to introduce the - the idea - I think it was the president who was trying to introduce the idea of having a big gathering of South African students, including black and white students, to discuss some of the political problems in the country and of course they were saying : What for, you know - I mean there's just no point, and we don't have anything to discuss with you guys - you know, we used to be part of the same organisation - it became quite clear we couldn't remain as part of that organisation of NUSAS, and now we going different ways - I mean you guys must work amongst white students and, you know, we not really that interested in what you doing - kind of we going our own way.

And there was a - an incredibly sort of hostile feeling coming across and also quite an arrogant feeling of we're not really interested in you and we don't particularly care what you kind of doing and it's not particularly significant anyway in South Africa - that's how it - I mean that's my memory of it - I don't remember the exact words, but there was a - a sort of feeling that was conveyed - and we went away I mean -

The other thing that struck me while we were there is there was somebody (?) like Patrick Fitzgerald who was really - I mean in many ways in his public response to people was incredibly (?) arrogant sort of left wing intellectual and quite strong in his own ideas, but in that environment I mean he was like a kind of first year student who was sort of apologising for his political convictions in the face of the sort of hostile feelings from these guys in the - in the attempt to actually start discussing certain issues and put something across, and it was quite clear that none of us had had much contact with that level of politically committed black student.

I actually came from a different environment (?) because I'd actually been through the Catholic student thing and I had a lot of contact with black students who were Catholic and, you know, sort of we'd been through a lot of these types of battles before, so I think I'm (I was) in a slightly different position, I'm not sure, but I - I couldn't understand why people (Laugh) were so apologetic - I mean that's probably the best word.

Anyway we - we emerged from that meeting - we discussed it afterwards and it was quite clear that we'd achieved nothing, and people were quite despondent in a way, and I just have a - a kind of feeling - I remember a feeling of afterwards thinking one of the most important things for white students, if they really to - to become part of the struggle in South Africa, is that they have to feel that they have a role to play and they have to actually know that they doing things, so that when you get into that kind of environment you don't have to feel that you have to apologise for your existence, because if you feel that there's no way you'd ever become part of that struggle.

M.R. I mean I remember that very strongly - it was a kind of feeling that I came away with - and in a way I mean I actually did feel that I was playing some kind of role, partly through my own connections within Catholic student circles and partly through the work that we had done in working with other whites to try and get them to change their - and I realised that I actually personally responded very differently to what some of the other people responded in that - that particular meeting.

It was funny because the chap we met there was Diliza Mji and I never (Laugh) - I never had any contact - you know, when (?) he went to jail I knew (?) various things afterwards, and many years later I came into contact with him again in UDF circles, and of course his - his position is very, very different today - it's quite funny (?) - I've never actually spoken to him about that particular meeting.

J.F. What year was that?

M.R. That was also '76, but I think it was before June 16th. - I can't remember but I'm pretty sure it was before June 16th. - if it wasn't then it must have been quite soon after, I don't know, but it was quite close to that time.

J.F. And did JOCETO carry on as an elite (?) community for a number of years, or when would you say it was (.....)

M.R. Well, from '77, although there was some change we - we also sort of spoke about it as a fairly long term commitment - we didn't want people sort of moving in and out every few months - it was supposed to be a sort of fairly intense experiment, if you like, although we didn't really see it that way - we saw it as ourselves trying to live differently and trying to live as a community and that it should be a fairly long term commitment - but there were changes - I mean one guy got married and moved to Cape Town - somebody else went - met some Belgian guy and went - the one woman - and went over to live in Belgium, got married to him - so there was a fair amount of change.

Not a hell of a great turnover, but in the first sort of three or four years a number of people left and a few of us were left behind - it actually lasted about six, seven years - pretty similar to this sort of thing that we started with, but there were quite a lot of changes on the way - I mean it became quite clear to us that our concept of in a way creating an island which was totally different from the rest of the society wasn't terribly realistic - that the pressures from the kind of world we came into contact with out there weren't something that you could sort of ignore and sort of build isolated little sort of Utopian spots which were totally different from the rest of that society, and in fact a few of began to feel that the only way you could really start orienting change or society to change in that type of direction was really to work at a broader political level, and that through those broader political changes one could - you could experiment on a small scale, but it would never really work because the influence of the society outside - the kind of pressures you come into contact with, the environment you have to live in, are such that it makes it very difficult to live a totally different existence first of all.

Second of all it wasn't necessarily the best way because often you actually alienated yourself from that society - you cut yourself off - you became like a sort of strange freak in that environment and the (.....) very little influence on change in that broader society, and it was actually wrong to cut ourselves off in that way.

M.R. And I mean that - that obviously related on different levels to different communities because as whites, you know, in many ways a lot of us felt quite alienated from the sort of broader white community, if you like, and were aiming to identify ourselves much more closely with what was happening in the black community, but at the same time as - as Christians who'd come from an environment where we were actually working quite hard to change other people within the white community to - to share (?) the same kind of commitment as us - it became clear that if you really wanted to do that you couldn't become a freak in a white community, otherwise eventually ordinary people who might be committed in some or other way to sort of social justice or whatever wouldn't be able to relate to you at all, and you couldn't really move those people because they would see you as someone so far away and so kind of different to them that you'd have no meeting point, no contact point.

And I think we learned that actually quite early on, and they were quite valuable lessons when at a later stage there was a - a much greater emphasis within the white community generally on doing something about changing whites, starting political organisations within the white community, creating alternatives for people, but doing work actively within the white community.

I think our experience in - in - in those Christian circles, those early attempts, were very, very valuable because we learned a hell of a lot about the kind of dos and don'ts of trying to actually help other people to come to grips with a different type of society or different types of political options, the sorts of things that threatened people - the kinds of things that people have a - those kinds of fairly big blocks to even beginning to discuss certain topics as white South Africans.

J.F. What did you do with the money that you saved (.....)

M.R. Oh, we - ja, the idea was that we would - we would live more simply and therefore there would be excess and that excess should be used for work - working for change - but remember we had fairly different ideas about what working for change meant, so some people in that house wanted to donate it to sort of worthy causes like some charity causes, and there were some of us who were quite unhappy with that and felt that - there was a whole debate about charity - I mean we went through all the same kinds of debates, but ja, there were differences.

In the end we sort of - we would just compromise and just basically give it to whatever we could all agree on - some of us used some of that money for political work that we were doing - organising work, financing some things that we were involved in etc., but we also gave quite a lot of money to sort of charity (.....)

J.F. (Faulty tape - guessing a bit) Do you want to tell me just organisationally (.....) for the rest of your career which you were involved in from the late '70s onwards (.....)

M.R. O.K., well - it was on a range of different levels - I - I started in the early time what I said to you just now in CathSoc and being involved on that - later on I actually got involved in the national student federation - the Catholic student federation called NCFS and I - I was president on that some year - I can't remember which year, but it was - it was quite significant because I had been involved in student politics for a while and then people asked me to come and help with the national Catholic student thing, so I sort of left that for a while, but it overlapped between the two and for a while I was actually involved in NUSAS and NCFS at the same time, trying to sort of -

M.R. Which was quite difficult, but when I was on campus my involvement was largely - well, it was, as I say, the first SRC I was an ordinary SRC member and I had certain administrative responsibility, but I was only there for five months, I think - six months - the second time I stood for the SRC I actually was an executive member and I had a lot of kind of bureaucratic work to do, but I was also projects officer for a while, which meant I had responsibility for the political programme on campus - I had to actually give that up because I just couldn't keep everything at the same time.

I was also involved on a - on a faculty level within the arts faculty - we had an arts students council, which was attempting to actually get people to take much more seriously organising within the art faculty as a whole - in other words, political science students actually doing something about say, thinking about their curricula, about, you know, what direction, the sort of stuff they were being taught was taking them in - what relevance it had to Africa - I mean that - that type of thing, and sort of re-examination of our education, if you like - there was quite a big stress at one point in NUSAS on that, and we wanted to sort of build up the faculty councils, and it was - it was throughout the arts faculty - I mean students who were studying psychology, we wanted them to re-examine their stuff (.....) organising themselves as students studying that particular subject type of thing.

And I was involved there for a while - I was president of the arts students council for a year - I can't remember exactly what point - but that meant that a lot of my work was on that type of level - it was after I left the SRC actually, and I didn't stand again for the SRC - I was also involved in Catholic Church things generally - we had a - we had something called the - the laity council, which was - well, I don't know if you know (?) much about the Catholic Church, but basically it - it's fairly sort of clergy oriented - I mean the bishops are basically the top of the church and then the priests and whatnot run most things below, but there's an attempt to get the ordinary people of the church, if you like, to function on certain structures, and every two years they had this big gathering which was supposed to be representatives of Catholics all round the country coming together.

And remember 80 percent of the Catholic Church is actually black, so a lot of the representatives who came to that meeting were actually black people, black Catholics, and they would come together - they would elect a - an executive and they would perform some kind of nominal function - it was a very ineffectual body - but one year we decided - I can't remember which year - I think it was '76 or '77 - that it was important for us to get involved in that and try and do something about the sort of Catholic Church generally, so we went along to this gathering.

Now it was very strange because, as I say, 80 percent of the Catholic Church is black, but that gathering was about fifty fifty white and black, and there were a lot of clergy type people - there were a few nuns, couple of priests actually represent - you could send anybody - it was supposed to be laity, but there were quite a few actual clergy people there - there were others who were sort of - very sort of pious Catholics that had no kind of social involvement at all.

The black people represented also generally tended to be the - the status people in their community - it was school teachers, small businessmen, some professionals, so it was a very unrepresentative gathering, if you like, but because major conflicts because we (?) - we introduced a whole lot of political issues and we just pushed them onto the agenda.

M.R. And the chairman at that time was a young lawyer who had actually been in Catholic student circles before but was pretty right wing and fought us I mean all the way - we - we introduced a number of issues and in the end the major issue was this issue about the army and conscientious objection, and it was a huge fight - I mean it was - it was '76 - it was '76, not '77 where we - we - we put forward a motion which basically said that the Catholic Church should - it was phrased something like any member of the Catholic Church who participates in any of the armed forces or the police is basically alienating himself from the Catholic community - something like that - because of the political situation and so - I can't remember the whole wording.

And it was a major battle because I mean those kinds of issues hadn't really been debated that much generally in South Africa, never mind within the Catholic Church - but the funny thing was as the debate got heated so more and more of the - the black delegates sided with us because of the situation they came from - not because they were particularly political people at all, or involved at all, but just because the issues were such that they couldn't help but do it, and a lot of the white - some of the white liberal people were just - were hell of a confused and just didn't want to vote on the issue at all - didn't want to take a particular stand.

We wanted to pass the resolution and actually publicise it afterwards to make a big issue of it within the Catholic Church, because if the laity council had actually passed a resolution like that it was supposed to be representative of the whole body of the Catholic Church, although it wasn't really - but it would have made a big impact - would have put that issue on the agenda - but the liberals were actually pushing for not taking a vote on that because they didn't want to create this kind of big thing (?) - and of course the right wing just opposed us all the way, and I mean we -

I remember this debate (Laugh) - we started at three o'clock in the afternoon and we finished at something like two o'clock in the morning, just fought all the time, and the chairman was just - when (?) we got to the point when we were sure we would have won it because we kind of swayed more than half the audience, but the chairman was preventing it from being put to a vote and he was just saying: Let's discuss it more, it's got big implications - we can't afford to take a vote - and in the end I mean I managed to sideline it - they (?) sort of said: O.K., we'll - we'll take a private vote - we won't put the resolution formally, but we'll just take a private vote to see how people feel, and then it'll just be an internal matter, not - not a formal resolution of the gathering - and of course that wasn't what we wanted at all.

Anyway we worked a little bit through that - we elected some people to that executive, and a number of us were very angry about what had happened and just refused to participate after that, but some of our people actually went onto the executive and tried to do some work on that level - anyway that was one other involvement, if you like - but during my student years I mean it was mostly various types of student politics on - on a range of different committees and....

J.F. When did you leave Wits?

M.R. Well, remember I had - I had changed from engineering - I did a BA, then I - I did honours in industrial sociology - now from that time I had started having contact with some of the trade unions and just on a kind of support committee level had done a little bit of work for - for trade unions - that was -

M.R. I started BA '77, '78, '79 - that was 1980 I did my honours degree. I then registered for a masters in 1981, and my topic was - was to be something on the lines of what is a working class politics in South Africa, and it meant that I was going to have a lot of - in fact I started having quite a lot of contact with trade union people, and I was already at that point doing some support committee work, and in fact what happened is that I had - I had sort of had quite a lot more contact throughout that year, '81, and by 1982 it was becoming clear that I was either going to actually take seriously my academic work or I was going to get more involved in trade union work - it had to be one - one or the other - couldn't actually be - be both, because (?) I just couldn't keep up an involvement, so I actually decided - I mean I didn't cancel my registration but I basically decided at that point that I wasn't going to take seriously the academic work and I'd just get more involved in union work.

And so I got much more involved in the unions, and eventually I think for the whole of that year I worked basically as a volunteer helping with education work, helping to straighten out some of the problems in union offices - I did one formal thing where the department, the industrial sociology department was involved in running some education courses - well, not formally but sort of informally - some of the lecturers were involved in running education courses for FOSATU because they were quite closely linked, and I actually helped around that programme for a while.

In the end it was actually a toss up because outside of that I was doing work with SAAWU and GAWU and the municipal workers union which were a sort of a different branch of the trade union movement at that point - and in the end it became a toss up between applying for a full time job for the FOSATU education programme or going into work full time for a sort of SAAWU, GAWU trend, if you like, within the trade union movement, and after a lot of thought about it and talking to - to various people I decided that it would be more useful to go into the SAAWU, GAWU area, and that was not - not for political reasons - I had fairly clear political options at that point in time - we - we were quite critical of what was happening within FOSATU, although there was a lot - there was a lot of good organising happening.

It was basically go into FOSATU to try and ensure that a different kind of political position is strengthened or go into SAAWU and GAWU to try and do work with people that I agreed with politically but where there was a lot of need for resources for kind of jacking up with the - the style of organising - there were a lot of people needed there - and in the end we opted for that - I mean I (?) basically decided to go into that area.

But I mean I'm jumping a lot of steps because there were various things happening within the white community in between at that time - there was the whole anti republic thing happening - and there were various involvements that I had in that - in that sort of process - in fact what a lot of that led to - I can't remember which year but I think it was when there was that mass swoop on white activists - we had been in the process of discussing with a lot of the - the sort of involved people within the white community - this was generally off campus people - the possibility of starting some kind of organisation within the white community off campus, and originally it was going to be a sort of a linking the left community together just on a social level, on a support level, moral, organising more systematic social events to bring people together and try and build up a more coherent political community, and obviously political discussions and such things as well.

M.R. But also include people's sort of living circumstances and just having contact with each other socially and that - that type of thing - now that was just before all those people got picked up - I can't remember when they got picked up - '81, so it was - it was happening sort of early in '80 - early in '81 - there I was involved with - there was a - a kind of a call group of us, which included Barbara Hogan, myself - I can't remember if Cedric de Beer was involved - I think he was - Barbara Creecy, a few others - and we were kind of discussing the possibility of setting up some kind of - of white organisation.

In fact that didn't really work out at that particular point in time, but what happened was a lot of people got detained, and when they got detained we set up a kind of support committee structure for them, and that actually brought people together in a very similar way to what we were thinking about, not - not quite because it was very oriented towards the detentions, but it brought people together, and in fact we ended up throughout the period of their detention having fairly large meetings of, if you like, a kind of a left wing community.

We had about 80 people, and (?) I remember that first night meeting straight after people had got detained, and for quite a long time after that we had fairly big meetings on a regular basis - they were a bit directionalist because we weren't too sure where we were going, but in fact out of that grew eventually through various other groups JODAC - also DPSC emerged out of that whole process - but there was a lot of discussion about that kind of - not - not the - ja, DPSC eventually, but there was DESCOM first in fact, and then DPSC emerged out of DESCOM - that was sort of happening parallel, if you like to.

J.F. The trade unions (.....) experience of having two separate (.....) (.....) keeping your political direct (?) (.....) political self linked, which happens within the whites, but in other - in the trade unions (.....) with blacks or was it the kind of schizophrenic existence or was it just two different kinds of work - was the one becoming more strong than the other, was the one more difficult than the other?

M.R. Well, the trade union work was a new - a new area for me - I mean I had for - the work within the white community wasn't new - I mean I'd been doing that ever since I got politically involved, which was - which was really sort of '75, '74, so that was, if you like, just part of that process - I didn't feel - I think a lot of others found this idea of working within the white community generally quite a frightening one, because a lot of left wing students have quite an explicit rejection of their families and their - their background - they don't actually want to have anything to do with the sort of liberals or the liberal background that a lot of them came from because they see it as compromising and - and that wasn't the case with us because we'd always - or I and various others who came out of a Catholic background, a Christian student background, had always made an attempt to work within that community and felt it was important to actually -

So that wasn't strange to me - that was - that was fairly - you know, it was sort of a continuous process - but working within the black community again wasn't totally strange because I'd had a lot of contact with black students in my Christian student work, but working with workers in a trade union environment was very different - I'd never done that before - I didn't really understand what trade unions were.

M.R. Although academically we'd done a lot of work on workers and industrial relations and - it was very, very different going into a union office and just beginning to understand what it meant on a day to day basis to work within a trade union context - meeting ordinary workers with very, very basic problems, you know, of whatever was happening to them in - in their particular factories - victimisation, wage problems - I mean there were in a way quite apolitical problems, day to day problems, and yet the overt face (?) of the trade union, the leadership, particularly within the unionists (?) that I was working in, and the general orientation was very political as well, but it was - ja, that was a very strange - in that sense strange world and - and a new one for me.

It was trying to - we were all grappling - I mean we didn't know much about unions, and I mean that wasn't just me - it was like everybody who was working in the unions - there were - it was like a totally new experience for us - in a way the - the FOSATU type people had a much more solid background - they'd - a number of them had been working in unions since 1973, whereas our unions had emerged (?) in '79, '80, you know, and they were like new, and we were discovering things on the way - we were grappling with how to deal with different things, how to build structures - what type of education was appropriate for workers - and I mean it was all of us, you know - it wasn't just myself.

It was quite strange for me as well because I happened to be the only white working in that environment - there were others who were - obviously there was a lot of links with other white on a political level by all of our - our sort of main union people, but in the actual union offices amongst those unions when we went to union gatherings I was the only white guy amongst those unions - it was quite different to the sort of FOSATU thing where there were a hell of a white - well, large number but there were certainly lots of whites involved, and they were sort of more used to having white people around.

That was strange - I mean it was sometimes quite difficult, because although on a kind of intellectual level and perhaps an ideological level the people within those unions were quite committed to non-racialism, working it out in practice is also - it's a difficult phenomenon - it's not a sort of easy process - you've got to - you've got to work out small problems - you've got to - you've got to overcome, as in any organisation, you inevitably get tensions amongst people - now when we developed tensions there was the added dynamic that maybe we didn't understand each other that well, particularly with people that I didn't know all that well.

Some of the guys I'd worked with politically and had gotten to know quite well and it was not a problem really at all, but with others where there were tensions often the racial divide played up to the tensions, complicated things, meant that people did respond racially quite often - perhaps I did too, I don't know - it's quite difficult to assess from your side - so it was difficult - it was actually quite a sort of process of - of learning how to respond in that environment.

J.F. What kind of issues are you thinking of that were - did come up that complicated?

M.R. Well, it - it - it's a range of things - I mean when you working in any organisation really you have, you know, some people who may be quite incompetent and the organisation needs to discipline them - you might have a difference of opinion about how something should be done.

M.R. You might have a personality clash - I mean all those things happen in every organisation - now with me it was more complicated because sometimes if somebody resented me maybe just because they were quite undisciplined and I was actually siding with the people who were saying that, you know, we have to actually be much more disciplined in our work, then that person didn't just respond (?) to me as somebody else who was criticising them - it was often, you know, somebody who was a - a kind of alien element who was criticising them - and it was quite difficult to get away from the racial overtones - if I was making a suggestion, which somebody else might have made exactly the same suggestion, which was say, critical of the direction we were taking, and often it was other people who made those suggestions, sometimes people would respond differently to me making those suggestions, and we'd have - we'd have to work through that - I mean we'd actually (?) have to kind of get used to each other - ja, I mean I had to be more sensitive to the fact that people might respond in such a way and actually try and - and work around that if I really wanted to make a contribution.

It wasn't very different to, you know, when I used to work within the white community and realising that people had certain sensitivities and blocks, and if you really wanted to work effectively with them you'd have to understand those sensitivities and try and ensure that you can talk to people in such a way as to get around that type of mental block, if you like, but it was a whole new environment and it was different blocks, it was different emotional reactions, and it included my own reactions - I'm not just talking about other people's reactions to me - it was difficult - it still is in a way - I mean it's not something which I think goes away.

The fact is that we grow up in very different circumstances, very different environments - we also grow up in South Africa with very deeply engrained prejudices about each other, and it's very difficult to actually totally put those aside, and it - one other point it just keeps re-emerging and you keep on working through it - I - it's not a major stumbling block - it never made me feel that I should leave, although at times I mean I did often feel quite despondent about the possibilities, but ja, it was very difficult - it was also the early days of - of a non-racial position sort of re-emerging in South Africa.

J.F. This is the early '80s (?)

M.R. Ja, '81 - we'd had a lot of ideological discussion about it on a leadership level, but when you talking about lower levels very few activists had come into contact with each other, and even - even in the political organisations I mean you - I on many occasions ended up attending meetings say, with some youth activists or black students who had never met whites who'd been involved in the struggle, never - I mean it was like a first experience for them - or.....

END OF SIDE ONE.

J.F. I think the core is - of what we're getting at, we've really discussed overtly, has to do with how you gravitated - if maybe you could talk about what kind of whites do you think gravitate towards the unions and gravitate towards - in those early years towards FOSATU as opposed to the unions you joined - what was your difference - maybe (?) you were at the industrial sociology department, it would have - there was a kind of well beaten path that went to FOSATU, and you didn't go in that direction - what was that about?

M.R. Well, there were a number of differences - what had happened in the sort of early '70s was that a lot of - there were white students who were involved in helping to set up trade unions, and white university lecturers, and I mean really what was happening there was people who came from a background which intellectually stressed the fact that it was really important to organise workers if the political struggle in South Africa was to - was to be successful I mean was to create a sort of fundamentally changed society you had to have workers involved on a large scale, and unions were a good way of involving workers, and from a fairly intellectual commitment - I mean intellectual in the sense of quite abstract commitment to a set of ideas - people started getting involved in unions and started helping to build up - and the experiences in the early days were obviously incredibly intense - lots of battles with the police - a lot of hostility - black trade unionists just being total anathema to employers - employers not really wanting to talk to them at all - and a lot of very difficult struggles.

At the same time a lot of those people had never really had any involvement of political struggle outside of that - they actually just walked from an - a fairly academic environment straight into a trade union thing and a setting up of trade unions, and on a variety of different levels they didn't want to mix in political issues with trade union issues, and so a lot of them, basically because they felt the union movement couldn't survive if it got involved in trade union issues, actually explicitly avoided those issues - didn't want them to come up within the trade unions - didn't want to sort of get involved in any kind of broader struggle - they saw it as a struggle to build up strong trade unions and that in the long run that would actually contribute to the political struggle in South Africa because it would involve more workers - it would make the working class as a class more effective in participating in that, largely because workers would get involved in the unions - they would learn leadership skills, they would organise themselves, they would start having discussions, and therefore they would become a more powerful force.

Nothing wrong with that generally, but the divorce from a tradition, the history of struggle, from some of the struggles that were happening even at that point were starting to emerge within the black community was a big problem, because it actually meant that people were creating their own little world - remember for ordinary workers who joined trade unions, they basically joined trade unions because they wanted their day to day problems solved - not necessarily political at all - they just ordinary people - so they come along and someone's got a specific problem - what they learn fairly early on is that - and I mean workers have a real experience of that every day - is that you can't do anything by yourself - you're a totally helpless pawn against sort of management, you know - those (?) kind of big structures - it's got all the power, it's got all the money - it can get rid of you at any point - but if you club together you can do something about that - you can actually fight together - and it's a unity experience.

M.R. It's an experience of how organising can help one to gain confidence to be able to stand up to people that you never thought you had any kind of possibility of fighting against in the past, and it's not - although there're a lot of political issues involved, and there're obviously issues which come up all the time which have political overtones, it is a new experience, and it was certainly at that point a very new experience for most people, this thing of building up trade unions, so there's no necessary link, except for the fact that all the issues you fighting are fairly political, between that and - and the struggle that say, was happening with the students in the townships - a struggle that was still going on in various communities to fight against removals, or the sorts of struggles that were beginning to emerge around civics - it was sort of much later - towards the end of the '70s.

And it was possible to create a kind of false environment where you don't raise those issues in the union context - there's no way you'd stop those same people from getting involved if they happen to encounter that type of thing in their own community or whatever, but it was possible to sort of create a different kind of environment within the unions where you just don't raise those kinds of issues because they not the types of issues we discuss here, type of thing.

And so I think that's really what was happening, and when at a later stage some of the other unions started emerging, and started emerging under - well, first of all in a - in a more politically charged context because obviously the situation in the country was changing - it was the late '70s, early '80s - and also the kinds of people who got involved in organising those types of unions with (?) SAAWU and GAWU and - were people who had a much greater overt commitment to the struggle and were trying to link it to a history of struggle and were seeing trade unions as part of that process of struggle - not as ends in themselves but as - as organisations that were helping to mobilise workers who were taking on just one facet of a broader struggle, and that those same workers had to be involved in others facets as well because it was just one struggle.

I think partly the fact that it was guided by people who emerged straight out of that process of struggle in the black community meant that those issues were much higher on the agenda - it was partly an ideological difference, but partly just the kinds of people who guided the development of those unions in the early days were people who were very basically involved themselves in all those different types of struggle, so obviously they passed that onto the unions - sometimes within the - I think the FOSATU type area it was very often whites who were not involved in that process at all, and first they didn't understand it - second, you found it quite threatening to the possibility of building up a strong union and so actually influence those unions to stay a little bit distant from that sort of broader process.

I think in the end the difference when you start talking about, you know, an experience within those different unions is not just one of - of, you know, whites being involved in one and others not being involved (?) - there definitely were major ideological differences within the - I don't even know what to call them, but what eventually became the UDF aligned unions, there was a much greater focus all the time on linking it to the broader struggle, understanding how workers can actually become part of a national democratic struggle as a whole, find ways of actually integrating people into that.

M.R. Sometimes people made a lot of mistakes I mean on a basic sort of trade union level, because they didn't really build up very strong structures on the shop floor - there was - because people were so involved in a whole range of other political organisations or a range of political commitments, it was difficult to actually spend the amount of time that was necessary to just build up the union side - make sure that there were strong structures there - and that was used against those unions.

On the other side - on the FOSATU side it was quite clear that you had a very strong base of a fairly large number of ordinary workers becoming involved, becoming more confident - taking charge of things in their own workplace - who were being prevented, if you like, or were being influenced to remain distant or aloof from the broader political struggle, and that it was really important for people to go in there and to try and change that, to try and ensure that there were other influences.

So when it came to making a choice about where to go it was actually a toss up between those two - do we try and - well, in my own case, we obviously wanted to feed more people into FOSATU to try and make sure that things would change there, but at the same time it became clear that politically we needed to strengthen the other unions - we needed to actually try and make sure that things were organised much more systematically inside (?) those unions - so for all of us who, I suppose, emerged at that time, it was a choice between going into the one or going into the other for political reasons.

J.F. And - I'm interested in trying to just look at the aspect of what you're saying that relates to the fact - that relates to non-racialism - I don't want to push a point that doesn't exist - however, it is quite striking that of the few - the tiny percentage of whites who were involved in the struggle, you have had historically a very large percentage who followed the path of that (.....) - and that that's a disproportionate number - that the whites have somehow - had somehow found the (.....) specially in the '70s in the union movement - and I just wonder if what you're saying you can direct towards that aspect - I'm not saying it's a huge aspect - maybe you want to put it in its place - maybe you want to say to me : Look, it's actually just a tiny point that it emerges at - how it fits - whether when you say - when you had that phrase about being threatened by (.....) maybe it has something to do with the kind of power that many blacks are increasingly feeling or whatever - isn't that fear of the national democratic movement - there isn't that fear of the groundswell and a lack of control - maybe it's something particularly white that they want (?) - or intellectual more than (?) white - maybe that has to be differentiated - maybe you can point out to me that - I think one thing you forgot that I think you probably should put in because it probably is important to your argument was you went in such detail describing your student career, but you didn't mention your career relating to the unities, and it would seem that what you're saying is that you didn't have any - you were involved in community issues and from that went full time into trade unions, whereas many of those whites would have never had an involvement in community issues - anyway I'm just throwing things out to ask you.

M.R. Well, when you say community issues I mean I think my - my involvement within the white community was essentially - initially it was basically Catholic Church oriented or within Christian circles, and I mean it was a variety of different things - it was student work - it was work on the level of the sort of laity council type of thing that I mentioned just now - there's a whole range of other things that I was involved in - justice and peace - various things within the Catholic, which involved just working with ordinary whites - not student people - within the church.

Outside of that within the white community I mean I think something that's important to realise is that outside of student work there was nothing that existed as a political or an organisational basis for doing work within the white community - I mean there were fairly liberal type organisations like say, race relations which gathered some whites together - there was the Black Sash existed for quite a long time - but there wasn't really any kind of point of entry - if you left university and you wanted to do work which was somehow more closely linked with the broader struggle that was going on, trying to bring people into that struggle, there was nothing - there weren't organisations that existed, and that was really what we were trying to create, what I was talking about earlier and I say we were trying to create some kind of organisation within the white community in sort of 1980, '81.

We were trying to bring together initially the left oriented people because they weren't even in close contact with each other - there was no sort of organisational base or even a kind of community base that - that sort of linked people - they'd leave university - you'd know they were sympathetic in some broad way - some of them were involved in various things, but it was on an isolated basis - there was nothing that actually brought all those people together - so a lot of that work - I was trying to - that I was involved in (?) all the time, if you like, on a community level, but a lot of the work that happened within the white community tended to focus on students, because NUSAS existed as an organisation - it gave people the opportunity to do work on that level.

It in fact was probably the - the biggest base at that time of leftish white people, if you like, but it was at a student level, and I mean I - O.K., I worked at a student level - I worked on - on a range of different things outside of the student level within the church and outside of the church when we were trying to set up the sort of beginnings of DESCOM and JODAC and the things that came before JODAC, and from that I - I went into the - the trade union circles - a lot of other people who had a very similar orientation to what I did were working within the white community, but student circles, so I'm not saying that they were isolated or that there weren't lots of other people who were doing that kind of thing - I think there were, and that they were concentrating themselves -

It was also a transition phase because during the sort of - from '76 onwards there was a much greater attempt to say : Let's look at how we fit into the long tradition of struggle - let's try and go back and see whether there is a place for white students who don't want to be (?) a sort of disjointed island on this campus which is not linked to the broader struggle amongst the black community and is not linked to any kind of tradition of struggle amongst the white community, and in fact there's nowhere to go once you leave university - it was very confusing I think for a lot of students, but there -

M.R. I mean the reality was there was nothing once you left university - now some people got involved in trade unions in the '70s - I'm not sure whether one can generalise, but there - there were a lot of them who actually got involved in trade unions basically out of an academic commitment, if you like - it was a - you (?) studied certain issues - you felt that it was important to do work amongst workers, so people decided to go into trade unions.

The broader political climate in the early '70s was also slightly different - I mean there weren't large numbers of organisations around - there weren't - there wasn't the kind of contact between say, different civic groups, youth groups and trade unions or other forms of struggle that emerged in the '80s - so it meant that if you went into a particular area of struggle like say, the trade unions, in a way you were quite cut off from other things, particularly if you didn't make efforts to - to establish those links - there weren't any organisational links that existed outside of people's informal contacts.

I think the reason a lot of those unions actually ended up going in that - in - in that direction was actually to a pretty large extent to do with the fact that some of the people who were involved in them were people who didn't have that close link to what was happening outside of that - didn't attempt to have that sort of - I mean they weren't involved in anything else - there wasn't a UDF that would make it easy for you, and if you personally were not involved in other types of struggle and you weren't trying to link that, your - your building up of trade unionists (?) to those types of struggle, you would inevitably go further and further away from that and you would build up a kind of isolated trade union politics - you would -

You would then start just discussing things in terms of the involvement of workers, where - where is that going - in some ways threatened by the politics that's taking place outside, because there's the possibility that that may bring some kind of an element of danger into - or an ex - I mean there was lots of danger all along in trying to build up trade unions, but if you were more politically involved it was quite clear that you could also be crushed in the same way as other organisations were crushed in the community, and maybe wanting to preserve that sort of base of organisation.

I don't know - I mean I - I don't know how one actually generalises about (?) why those particular whites who got involved in that area ended up going in the direction that they did - certainly on the campuses during that same time where I mean it was the most obvious place where you could see a large number of whites involved and what their direction was, people were moving away from that sort of orientation during the '70s, and were actually stressing much more the old traditions of the national democratic struggle, which is essentially a - if you like, an alliance of a whole range of different classes, the working class not being separated off into a tiny corner by itself - the broader political struggle being one which involved people from all communities.

It involved the non-racial element but it also involved a - a strong stress on bringing the oppressed people together on a broad level - now maybe that wasn't happening inside the unions, I don't know why - all I know is the environment I came out of was one of working within the white community to try and do things - I'd had a lot of contact with people within the black community on a student level, and outside of that within the church circles, and it was an attempt to sort of integrate whatever we did into a broad process of struggle.

M.R. So when I moved into the trade union movement from that background it was from the same perspective - there were lots of others who had a similar kind of perspective - they didn't go into the trade union movement - remember there was a hell of a lot of work that needed to be done in those early days within the white community as well, and also within the student movement and all the other sort of budding organisations that we had, like DESCOM and - and also it was difficult to move into this - to the - the trade unions - it wasn't an easy process.

The reason a lot of that happened in FOSATU was some people got in, they created opportunities for others to move in - I'm talking about whites now, because they actually helped to start those unions - so if you had contacts within those spheres you could then get a job - now I suppose generally the people who were - would have had contact and sort of an entry point would be people who had a similar orientation to some of the people who were there already.

It was quite difficult to get some of our people in, because we did at one point try and get some people who we felt were more progressive to actually go and get jobs there, and it was quite difficult for them to get jobs.

J.F. When you say our people mostly are you talking about blacks - would you say that you represent - that there aren't that many whites who have your point of view who are in the unions?

M.R. Ja, there aren't - I think there're lots of whites who have the same point of view, and in fact they organised on a much larger scale than the sort of small minority of whites who are involved, say within the unions and have a different orientation, but within the unions themselves there aren't many whites who have the same orientation.

J.F. And why is that?

M.R. I don't know - I think - I suspect that what - what generally happens is - well, let me go back a bit - I mean I - it - it's quite instructive to look at the example of a couple of people who went into FOSATU who were very sympathetic to the same kind of political direction as I'm talking about, and yet were actually quite influenced by the environment and moved in a different direction, and I - I think it's instructive to look at their experience, because what happens when you - when you work in a trade union, first of all it - it's a fairly all-consuming involvement - I mean it's a hell of a lot of work - it's - it takes up an enormous amount of time - it's very difficult if you're going to take it seriously to actually be involved in much else.

Now if you working in a trade union environment which has very little contact in and through your trade union work in other types of struggle, then you don't have those points of contact that would give you different types of influence, but () if you're not involved yourself in some kind of political organisation that helps you to maintain a certain insight into how your work in the trade union movement is linked to that broader political struggle, then I think your environment actually influences you a hell of a lot - and what generally happened is that a lot of the - the whites who went in initially with a very progressive orientation became closer and closer in their political orientation to the workerist position, because inside FOSATU there was nothing else.

M.R. You were working essentially to build up a trade union - it was a hell of a lot of work - you were trying to sort of fight for the rights of workers, which was important, and you were in some ways actually quite threatened by others who felt that they - they knew you came from a political background different to yours, so they would try and sort of keep you out of things, so you were struggling to maintain that, and yet all your work was oriented towards ordinary trade union activity, towards the kinds of things that people in FOSATU were always involved - there was nothing else.

So slowly I mean your struggles and your - your way of thinking, I think, becomes one of seeing the working class as an isolated entity, starting to exaggerate the role of trade unions in and of themselves - not really making any kind of link between trade unionist struggle and other forms of struggle because you not involved in it or because you don't come into contact with it in that - in that environment - and the fact that it's just an enormous amount of work anyway to build up those types of organisation, so I suppose you become more absorbed in it, so I think it - to a pretty large extent it's a matter of environment in context, you know, plus the fact that building up the unions was a huge task at that time, and I suppose it's excusable that people didn't have time to get involved in other types of things.

But the moment the environment changes, and I think one of the ways in which the environment changes is that the struggle in South Africa hotted up incredibly inside the communities, you started seeing the influence within all the different trade unions, not just the unions that I actually went in to work, where ordinary workers were becoming influenced by the fact that their children were involved in COSAS, by the fact that there was a - a war going on in the township between ordinary township residents, the civic people, and the - the police - so they would bring that back into the - into the trade unions, and so the context started changing - people were pushed in a different type of direction.

Also ultimately when we formed COSATU, inside the federation you had people who were very deeply involved in that type of politics - the discussions came up often - there was the possibility of saying : It's important for us to get involved in this (?) - which never even arose often within the FOSATU circles - so maybe it's a lot of that, I don't know - I actually went into an environment where the political struggle was an intense part of everything you did, there was no question about that.

It was difficult for whites to get in, which may have limited the entry of whites in those circles, simply because it - it's a fact of life in South Africa - it's quite difficult for whites to get involved in organisations that are predominantly black - you don't really fit there in a whole range of different ways - you've got to actually - there are contributions you can make, but you've got to - you've got to build a role - you've got to actually - people have got to get used to working with you - it's a - it's ja - it's a process.

Now I happened to be the only one who went in to those particular unions because there was nobody before - it's a difficult thing to actually start - I didn't think it was a huge priority to bring in lots of other whites into those unions for various reasons - I mean we could go into that.

M.R. But because of that it meant that there weren't lots of people getting entry into those unions through me, which would have been, I suppose, a - the same kind of process that happened in FOSATU if - if it had happened - and it would have been possible for me to bring others in - as a result maybe others weren't - other whites weren't influenced in the same way - I mean I was working in an environment where it was it was a - an integral part of my every day life, plus of course I was involved outside in a range of different things, so I think it was circumstantial - I mean I think it was - you know, if you went into FOSATU I think it was a great struggle to maintain a certain kind of orientation, whether you were white or anybody else, but particularly for whites....

J.F. FOSATU?

M.R. FOSATU, ja - if you came into our unions and you were white I mean you couldn't really help but come into contact with those political issues all the time, and if you were involved in other issues within the white community at the same time, obviously it makes a difference - I'm not sure if that helps to explain why....

J.F. There are two (.....) impressions (?) - the one is why would you explain that you didn't see it as a priority to bring a lot of other whites in?

M.R. Mmm - it was a range of things actually - it was partly the fact that whites tended to at that time be perceived in terms of what various whites had done in FOSATU (Phone) - I mean I think the first thing was that a lot of the trade union - the politically active trade unionists' perceptions of whites in the union movement was that they were sort of pushing for a - a direction that was anti the sort of history of struggle in South Africa - that was (?) anti involvement in the broader political struggle that was in many cases very much anti the A.N.C. and the tradition that that represented - anti SACTU - and that was because of what was happening in FOSATU - and it meant that it was actually quite difficult and for - for any white working in that environment to actually get people to sort of accept that one has a sort of role there, that one isn't a sort of suspect political element.

And I think it was very understandable - I mean people were working in an environment where they were struggling against what they saw as a - a tendency that was working directly in opposition to what they were committed to politically - so that was a problem - it was a problem for me, let alone anybody else, and I was actually quite involved in a whole range of other circles - I'd made political contacts because I'd been involved for a number of years before that and I knew the people that I was actually working with quite closely, and yet still it was a big struggle.

I knew it would be an immense struggle for anybody else - I had actually - I mean the reality of it was that I had actually gone through a very difficult process of breaking into those circles through the support work that I'd done and through just very, very slowly getting to know people, overcoming, as I say, a lot of the tensions and the problems that - that inevitably arose in the beginning, and I mean it had taken me probably in terms of knowing the people and having contact with them almost two years of working fairly closely with people before I felt that people accepted me and that I could actually fit in and not become an element that's just contributing to the tension in the organisation, or that raises sort of more problems than is worth type of thing.

M.R. So that was the first consideration and I mean it was very difficult for me to do anything in terms of bringing anybody else in - it was just a matter of trying to - to make sure that I played some kind of useful role and trying to contribute to the work that was happening. Secondly the reality was that inside those trade unions there was a hell of a lot of overt political discussion going on, which I mean it was - it was basically a collection of - of very politically involved and committed people, so on a day to day basis people would be discussing things about what was happening in the townships and where particular bomb attacks had taken place in police stations - they'd be discussing the sort of people's perception of the A.N.C. - they would be discussing the sort of armed struggle - I mean it would just be casual comments to other people who are pretty politically involved as well themselves.

Now if you went into FOSATU you never encountered that, O.K. - there wasn't - there wasn't a sort of atmosphere of - of - of sort of very politically involved people who trusted each other just chatting on a day to day basis in the union offices about things that in some ways were quite dangerous if they were sort of widely known, and so you could actually enter into FOSATU as just an ordinary white who was fairly politically committed, maybe didn't understand all that much, and sort of work your way in, and you either made it or you didn't make it, but it wasn't dangerous to anybody.

The thing is that in our unions it actually was - if you brought somebody in there who people were not a hundred percent sure of, either they would never talk in front of that person or else that person could actually become a danger to them, because it was a very politically charged environment - I mean you - essentially people who got involved there were people who were actually trusted - now that was a problem - I mean I didn't know how to overcome that - I mean I knew that a lot of the people I worked with who might have wanted to get involved in those circles were not used to that type of thing would actually struggle incredibly to try and sort of cope with that level of interaction - wasn't sure whether they would actually be able to fit in very easily in the beginning.

So I just tended to sort of leave the problem and if somebody else came in through other means then I would work with them - if they didn't then they didn't, and I'd just leave it - I didn't make any attempt to actually bring others in. I also wasn't sure that it was the correct thing at that time, because there was always the problem that you had to be very careful of the type of role you played as one, an intellectual, but two, just a - a white person who comes out of an environment where you have a lot more skills and education which would enable me to, for example, do things, like the union needed to hire a car, and I could arrange to hire a car - most other people couldn't in the beginning - that was the beginnings of organisation - obviously I'm not talking about later on.

We needed to say, book a - a room or find a venue in town - I was often in a position to do that, other people weren't - now it was a problem, because you actually wanted to get to the point where people didn't actually rely on people like myself to do that type of thing - when you got whites in there was often the - the - the problem that very quickly they assumed a position where they were administratively much more capable because of the background that they came from, and it was easy to just leave those tasks to them - now I saw that happening in the FOSATU unions - it was clear.

M.R. It was always the whites who were elected general secretaries, and the reason was basically because it's easier to just put somebody in who's got those skills than to try and train somebody else who hasn't - and of course if it's not a very politically charged environment where people are actually stressing the longer term struggle then there's - there's not really a reason - and also there was a big stress on non-racialism, so it seemed to be quite a progressive thing to put whites into those positions, and I don't think it was.

I don't think that there's a problem with that historically on that one should sort of wish to undo everything that happened (?) - but I think in the long run anyone who is actually politically committed would have to see that it's actually a problem to just absorb whites in and to dump them in those kinds of positions, because it just actually blocks the growth of other people - it actually - it diverts the organisation - it actually causes problems politically - and it's because inevitably if somebody else is a - a fairly skilled young black activist within the trade union movement, and yet just never gets a chance to actually get into that type of position simply because there's somebody else who comes in from outside, as it were, and takes over that type of position, it's going to cause problems, it's going to cause tensions, and also actually blocks the progress of people like that, because you obviously don't learn until you pushed into that type of position and you just have to cope - so there's a whole range of actual problems.

I didn't think at that time that non-racialism meant that more and more whites should get involved in areas like that - I actually thought it meant that it was something that we had to find ways of actually integrating ourselves into the broader political struggle - one very important emphasis was actually working to transform other white people in the white community, because I certainly thought that was possible, and it was obviously vital in the longer term for the political struggle inside the country - and secondly I thought where people did have skills we had to find ways of utilising those skills, but not in such a way that it actually prevented others from picking up those skills, from being trained to take on certain kinds of position - that we couldn't actually just assume a sort of unproblematic non-racialism, which in other words meant that the doors were open for anybody to do anything.

That was a problem, because what that ended up resulting in was a lot more tension, a lot more antagonism in fact between black activists who are rising and who should actually be taking some of those positions and white activists who are being put into those positions because they happen to have a background where they can just cope with the job much more easily in the beginning - and that we would fall back into exactly the same kinds of tensions that actually had emerged within NUSAS at the time when SASO broke away - I mean it was fairly obvious that you were in a position where the white students were more articulate - everything was being done in English anyway.....

END OF SIDE TWO.

M.R. in terms of coping with day to day organisational work, because if you have to organise a public meeting or a rally or a poster or a publication, generally whites have got, just through their schooling and maybe university experience, have picked up the kinds of skills that enable them to do that sort of thing very easily - now it's easy to get into the position where you end up doing all of that, so then who the hell ever learns to do it, you know.

So I didn't think that non-racialism was a kind of unproblematic, you know, treat everybody as equals business - it wasn't that at all - we were working in a situation where there were big inequalities, where there was a developing political struggle, which quite clearly had to ensure that ordinary grassroots people were actually being trained to take on the whole range of tasks, and that sometimes the role of whites could become a very problematic one, because they would end up blocking that progress and that development.

So it was delicate - I mean it was - it's often a very difficult problem - I'm - and I'm not assuming that today it's any less delicate - I think it's still a big problem, and it's going to remain a big problem in a future South Africa, because despite the fact that - that whites are and should be accepted as - as South Africans fully, and that people must be able to participate in the - in the political struggle must see themselves as South Africans must not feel guilty, must not feel that they can't participate in that process and become, if you like, full citizens of - of a liberated South Africa.

The reality is that we've got to overcome a whole process in which whites are - were dominant - still are dominant in terms of the kinds of skills that they have, the sort of background, the educational opportunities, and that very often if you put them into the positions just because they have those skills (Phone)....

J.F. That in fact it doesn't further non-racialism?

M.R. Ja, it actually - it - it - it actually creates more problems than it solves - it may solve certain immediate problems in terms of somebody fulfilling a particular political role, and it may seem to be in accordance with our principles of non-racialism, but in terms of the fact that it actually ends up blocking the development of other activists who need to be there, who actually need to develop and - and assume their role - and also activists who in the long run will be in a much better position to fulfil those roles than any white activist could, basically because if you working - trade unions it's - it's as true of a trade union as it is of any other type of organisation - the reality is you have to understand the people, the kinds of problems, the every day experiences of the people you organising amongst - that's the reality.

I mean the reason why we were successful in the white community, it was because we could actually get to the point where we really understood the types of problems that white people who had grown up in South Africa with all the prejudices, we understood why they had those problems - it wasn't a totally foreign thing to us - we'd actually gone through the same thing ourselves - and you can actually work with those people - you can understand the sorts of blocks they had - now you can acquire that of people in - in an environment that you don't necessarily - you not necessarily that familiar with - but the reality is that it's crazy to try and - and get people who don't have that sort of experience and let them become the major element in trying to work within that community when you have so many people who come out of that community who understand those problems, who've actually grown through it themselves, who should be developing leadership and taking on those types of tasks.

M.R. Doesn't mean that you blocked as a white activist from helping to make that process happen, but it does mean that your role in it is a very different one to that of an ordinary black activist who's just grown up in that community and should be organising amongst those people and helping to ensure that new organisations develop, that leadership emerges, that certain political things happen etc., etc. - so I think basically what it means for us is that non-racialism is - is important as a principle - it's important as a - as a guide - it's not an unproblematic concept in the process of struggle - it's certainly not unproblematic in terms of the role of whites in a whole range of different levels - it's not just whites - it's actually Indian people and Coloured people as well.

The reality is that there are gaps, and that South African society has actually created those differences between us, and we're not going to overcome them by pretending they aren't there - the only way in fact we'll be able to create a - a new society is by actually recognising the problems that that causes and ensuring that in our process of political struggle we overcome those problems - so it's an active non-racialism, it's a - it's a working to overcome the problems that racism has caused - not an assumed non-racialism which just says, you know, we all equal participants in the struggle, therefore we should all be able to do anything - and that's a real problem that we've encountered on a number of occasions within white organisations and in fact within say, UDF circles etc., where some people feel that non-racialism means pretending that race doesn't exist - and that's not true, and it's not realistic, and it just doesn't work in the process of struggle.

J.F. You've explained quite well why you haven't brought in masses of (?) more whites - what I'd like to ask you to explain is why more whites of the other persuasion seem to flock towards those unions - I wonder if it has something to do with intellectualised - an intellectual point of view as much as a white point of view - to me there's something very profound about coming to grips with what you've just said, race is a fact, you can't wish it away - also the class is a factor - you may be able to relate to Sydney Mafolani (?) quite well, but maybe both of you would have a lot more trouble relating to a guy who works in a mill who wears flour bags for socks and can hardly articulate, and I'm wondering if you see that intellectualised - if you're a white who has a very strong workerist or whatever positions then you have a kind of concept of workers that might bring you into that environment on a kind of almost an evangelical level, whereas if you are a white person who happens to be white who happens to be involved in UDF it might be a lot more difficult for you to insinuate yourself into the union movement because you - if you're more honestly (?) looking at the issue of class - a worker isn't some romanticised concept - a worker is a guy who's going to be hard to reach because he doesn't have education and because he's black and he speaks other languages, that kind of thing - I'm just wondering if the intellectual aspect is something - I asked Themba (.....) about white dominance in the unions, and he said it's intellectual dominance that's the problem, and they have - of course those people happen to be white.

M.R. Look, intellectuals are - I mean if you had to abstract that I think being an intellectual in a union environment is potentially a big problem, because in the same way as I - I mean some of the problems that I've just mentioned about whites and the possibility of dominance is exactly the same problem with regard to intellectuals because it's quite clear that someone who is very articulate - I'm talking about a black person now who has say, university background, can very easily dominate in environments like that in such a way as to actually prevent the growth of worker leadership, ordinary worker leadership and well, I mean what that really means is that

M.R. obviously workers in a situation where they are fighting against very immense day to day problems will want to put people into elected positions who can help to cope with those problems - now if they feel that somebody who's (?) quite educated and maybe will be able to do that quite well, they'll put that person in that position, and very often that person may exercise his role in that position in such a way as to actually stunt the growth of other worker leadership - ordinary people who come from the shop floor who are not that well educated, perhaps not that articulate, but who can develop leadership if they're put into the position, if they given the opportunity, if the structures are correct, if the person at the top is not actually dominating everything and providing all the ideas and actually stunting their growth - so it is a problem.

Intellectuals can be a massive problem within the trade union movement - is not necessarily a white problem - the reality of course is that in South Africa there's a very wide gap between those people who become students, intellectuals within the black community and the trade unions, because a lot of those people just never go into the trade unions - I mean there's no question that a large majority of - of intellectuals in the sense of people who've had formal university education will end up undertaking some profession, being involved in a range of other activities, but very, very rarely coming back and getting involved in trade union work - that's what's happened - that's the reality.

So the kinds of intellectuals, if you want to call them that, who - who have emerged within the trade union movement are often very bright individuals who have not necessarily had much formal education but have actually taught themselves, and have actually grown up from being in a very poor family, say, and not having had the educational opportunities, but just reading by themselves have improved themselves - if you like, organic intellectuals - people who've grown out of an environment where they have exactly the same experience as the ordinary workers, but are much brighter and have in a way spent a lot more time reading and perhaps are much more articulate in having emerged as leaders.

Now those people are not generally that much of a problem, because they've actually experienced a lot of that - they can be a problem, but they not as much of a problem - it's the whites who actually, because of political commitment, are intellectuals, have had all that background, are much more articulate, read much more, and then come into the unions because they have a political commitment to be there - that therefore the problem becomes a white problem, you see what I'm saying.

It may be generally an intellectual problem in broad terms, but in South Africa it reflects itself as a - as a problem of whites actually entering that type of environment - now when the same type of person, say the white intellectual, is also someone who, again maybe because of the realities in South Africa, and maybe also just because of a kind of academic intellectual inclination, tends to approach things in - in - in fairly academic terms, is not involved in the sort of basic struggle outside of the work they doing within the trade unions - once you combine all of those things that person then maybe becomes an influence for the union staying out of politics - becomes more and more workerist, if you like - it's perhaps an easy path to follow.

M.R. I think there's a - quite an intellectual attraction - the workerist position has quite an intellectual attraction because it's simple, it - it's a - you - you read Marx or you read stuff about workers and it seems to be very revolutionary and important, and if you not rooted in any kind of struggle outside of that where you've worked with ordinary people and you've tried to bring them into a process of struggle and you actually working at transforming the whole society - you've had practical experience of political struggle, or you haven't absorbed the history of that struggle and the lessons that it's given - that the workerist position is intellectually quite attractive to people - it - it seems revolutionary, it seems really great, it stresses the importance of workers, and so people kind of grab onto it.

If on the other hand you've actually come through that history - you've had some experience of it, or you've picked it up from - from older people who've been involved in that struggle, you've had some experience of practical politics and understanding what that means - it's very hard to just latch onto an unproblematic workerism - and maybe the reality is that more whites have that problem of not being linked into other struggles than other people, I don't know.

J.F. Do you see your responsibility as eventually keeping your eye out so you should be aware of the potential for organising white workers, or is that just a sell off not on the cards that you don't deal with it - did your ears prick up with the boilermakers at times - FOSATU will say : Oh, yes, well of course we do have a few white workers who've joined us - I've never met any of these people - is that an issue at all, because that's what the kind of AZACTU position - go organise your own working class, or organise your own people and why don't you try to get whites into the unions.

M.R. Ja - I don't think it's a reality at the moment - I think the fact is that - I mean if I think about what happens at union meetings, O.K., on a strictly union level there isn't - aside from overcoming some of the prejudice problems I mean which would be a big one, but perhaps not insurmountable in itself, one could actually bring whites into the unions because you'd be fighting for their rights like other workers - you'd - you'd be attempting to organise them, get them to understand that perhaps solidarity with other workers helps them in their battles against management - it would be a difficult struggle but it may conceivably be possible if it wasn't for the political element, but the reality is that our unions are politically committed and political discussions happen all the time, and no -

I mean the way I understand the - the kinds of white workers that I've known, it would be such an alienating experience for that person coming into that environment, not only having to cope with just ordinary prejudices but also having to cope with a very large political threat - people talking about the kinds of things that they would - it would take them years to actually be able to internalise slowly and begin to understand why people are committed to that type of politics, why it's not necessarily a huge threatening thing for them etc., etc., so I mean you - you may be able to - and I think FOSATU actually succeeded in getting some whites to join simply on the basis that they saw that in their factories when a black worker was fired the whole workforce went on strike and the union fought for him - when a white worker was fired I mean the unions were (?) half asleep, didn't really care - I mean didn't really know that was happening, and there was no real protection, so they joined.

M.R. But if they were to become actively involved in unions - or say, within COSATU now, they wouldn't last a week - the reality is the first political discussion would freak them out totally and they'd leave - our politics is actually too advanced in that sense for ordinary white workers to deal with now - whether the situation may change in the future I don't know, but I don't think so - I don't see much hope of that.

The reality is that for an - an ordinary black worker in the - in their trade union, they can talk about things like the fact that the kids are involved in a - in a kind of war against the education department, the fact that troops come into their townships and these people are basically oppressing them and that it - it's - it's a good thing for people to attack soldiers - they can - they can celebrate when some police station is bombed, you know - I mean it happens in the unions all the time - people can - when some MK guerilla is killed and there's a funeral people attend the funeral - they see it as one of our martyrs have been killed - these are our children - how does a white worker relate to all of that - it's bloody difficult I mean - I don't know.

J.F. Is it just the whites, because part of it before you even get to that - part of it would be that they'd go to a union meeting and the first thing that will happen is people in loud confident voices would begin singing songs in African languages - it sounded quite threatening to me - on a basic social, cultural level it could be quite threatening, because that - is that also an issue with Indian and Coloured workers, do you think?

M.R. It is - I mean the difficulty that one runs into - and it hasn't been a very large reality in some of the - in a lot of the COSATU unions - is that as soon as you get a lot of Coloured or Indian workers there's a language problem - the thing about trying to get ordinary workers to feel confident about participating in - in meetings and feeling like it's their union, and overcoming the kinds of, if you like, in-built feelings of inadequacy that comes out of being an ordinary worker, and just having no control over your own life, and also being a black person in South Africa etc., is that you must feel that at least if you start speaking you can speak in a language that you comfortable with and people will understand you, and that's a very important element.

Now if you start speaking - well, the only possibility is translation basically - if you start running meetings in English the large percentage of the black workforce just won't participate, and I mean you're just cutting out their possibility of becoming, you know, sort of equal members, if you like, to anybody else - so when you have - I mean you've just got to translate, and it just means that the whole process is much, much slower - it also means it's much more difficult for workers just to relate to each other - they can't just chat in between - you know, if there's a large contingent of Coloured workers and maybe some Indian workers they can feel part of the same trade union, but if they can't just chat to each other walking to the meeting or walking from the meeting there's a problem - there are barriers.

And that language problem is a major one - I mean I think it's going to remain a problem in the future - it's hard to overcome - I suppose in the long run we only going to overcome it if - if large percentages of - of Coloured and Indian workers actually start picking up African languages, you see, which happens with a lot of the black workers - I think that's often why they can't understand why it doesn't happen with others.

M.R. I mean we've had situations - take the mineworkers union - quite often in the beginning when they used to have meetings it was a big problem, the Sotho, Zulu, and a whole range of different languages, because people just didn't speak the other language - if you came from Lesotho you spoke Sotho, that's all - you didn't speak Zulu - and in the course of working in the union a lot of these workers have now picked up Zulu as well - they've actually -

First of all it was a psychological thing of it's important for us to do it because we're part of the same union and we've actually got the same problems, and secondly it's a practical thing - I mean people just were mixing with each other in union meetings and they - they've actually picked it up, so it's actually less important now - they can communicate with each other - people do just chat to each other.

Now you don't generally see that happening with Coloured and Indian workers - quite often after years in the same union they still won't understand each other that well - maybe some of the African workers will speak some English, but they won't feel confident - generally the Coloured and Indian workers haven't, on a large scale anyway, picked up African languages - it is a problem - it's going to remain a problem - but the only possibility of overcoming it is translation, which is what we do do.

J.F. Do you speak any African languages?

M.R. No - it's also a problem for me - it's actually quite a - it's been a problem for many years actually for - for a number of us - you - you get involved in a process of - of political struggle - remember in the beginning my involvement was largely white community - I had a lot of contact with black students, but it was never sort of a vital element - when I got more involved in the - the trade union movement it immediately became clear that I wasn't going to cope very well unless I learned an African language.

The problem then was I was still deeply involved in a whole range of other political work - I was involved still in the white community, and I was trying to keep up union work, and I wanted to learn a language - I just - just didn't cope - just didn't happen - my work in the union movement right in the beginning was education, which meant I was working a lot with people who actually spoke English, which enabled me in a way to get out of it - it's a big problem actually - it was a real pity because it meant I didn't have to try and learn it - I - I - in terms of the work that was being demanded of me it was much more efficient that I just worked with the people who spoke English and they actually did the other education.

Now that I'm actually working within the railways union it's become a big problem again, because I have much more contact with just the ordinary workers, you know, because I'm now working within one union - before I was working as an educator for a group of trade unions, so I was essentially working with shop stewards, organisers, people who spoke English - it wasn't a problem.

Now it's becoming a much bigger problem because I have to sort of - and I have to do something about it.

J.F. I haven't asked any specifics on your union history - when I said communities when I injected that at one stage I meant we very briefly mentioned anti republic day, which would be....

M.R. You mean black community issues?

J.F. Maybe you could just tell me what community issues that related to the black community you've been involved in, and then if you could just tell me specifically what your union involvement's been.

M.R. It's a bit of a - ja, when I - ja, when I speak of community involvement I was actually talking about white community, the work that I've done there - within the black community I mean there's - there's sort of the pre UDF and the sort of post UDF - pre UDF it was generally - I've had a lot of contact with youth groups and student groups in the black community, and that was, in the beginning, through my involvements with Catholic and Christian students work - it was a kind of inter-student thing in the beginning, then later on I actually worked in helping youth groups to - to organise themselves within the black community because of my work within white youth groups as well.

It also happened through, later on, having contact - just general political contact with some of the COSAS, the beginnings of COSAS, where I had met them through - I can't even remember - some of it was through Christian involvement, some of it was through student work, and others just contact in the black community, so a lot of them used to come round and some of the work that we did there - that I personally did was helping them to cope with some of the organisational problems - I did some educational work with people on that level, not really working - sometimes we worked together on political campaigns, but that would just be general stuff, you know - you - you'd sort of help to plan the campaign - we would - we would do -

The work that we'd do together would be things like producing media, organising public meetings, but apart from that we'd work separately in whatever area we were working in, like I would work within the white community, they would work amongst the black students or whatever - I also had a lot of contact with civic work, again largely through personal contacts and through some of the trade union people I worked with.

I - we had the education project in the unions - now what quite often happened was that civic people wanted some kind of education to happen within the civics - now some of our union people were involved in those civics, so we would just organise the educational events because we had all the resources and the background and the experience, so I quite often ran educational things together with the other guys that I worked with in the union education project for civics.

J.F. What is - is this something called the education project....

M.R. Oh, sorry, the - the original work I did amongst the unions was for something called JUEP, the Joint Union Education Project - we set that up - it was an education project for a range of different trade unions.

J.F. When was that set up?

M.R. '83, I think - I had done sort of volunteer work before that, but we formalised it in '83 as a - a project that serviced SAAWU, GAWU, MGWUSA - all the general unions and some of the more sort of industrial unions.

M.R. Ja, and I mean from that, as I say, we did education work for other groupings too - later on when UDF was formed of course there was much more overt involvement in just straight UDF activities - things like area committee structures - I was on the education committee, UDF education committee, and we did a lot of work there for a range of different UDF affiliates, but you - I mean it's not really real community work - I mean I - I could never function as a - a - an organiser in a civic, for example, because I mean the people who were involved there were generally people who lived in the community - I could help in a support capacity - could help to do education work often on organisational level, but I wouldn't be directly involved.

Student things is the same - I mean we often - even when I was involved in student work we had inter-student meetings, if you like, so we met black students but we didn't, even on the - on the sort of Christian level, we weren't involved as organisers amongst black students - obviously there were black students who were doing that - youth work as well, I mean it was generally a - it was a sort of slightly detached involvement, if you like - not a sort of the kind of involvement that any other organiser would have, but it was, ja - and of course UDF increased the possibilities for that type of work because there were so many joint campaigns going on, so we got involved in (and) - it was a little bit of an attempt to - to integrate some of the campaign work so for example, the million signature campaign, what we tried to do on certain levels was to get activists from different communities to join each other in doing house to house work in a community that wasn't theirs, so some of the TIC people tried to get activists from the Coloured areas from JODAC and from the African areas to go with them to do house to house work in the Indian communities, which was difficult but it happened.

The Coloured - some of the people working in the Coloured communities tried to do the same thing - it was much more difficult in the African communities of course because of the language problem, so that generally didn't happen.

J.F. So after JUEP what general union (.....) were you in?

M.R. Well, while I was in JUEP - well, that was supposed to be an educational project - what it ended up doing was it became a general organisational back-up for all the different unions, so we would help - the people working there would help unions to ag, do anything from rewrite their constitutions to jack up their structures to our ordinary educational work amongst organisers and shop stewards and ordinary workers - sometimes called in to help negotiate with management for those unions - so it was a hell of a wide variety - it was just the general kind of whatever the unions had problems with they would first come to us and say : Can you help - if we couldn't help they would have to go somewhere else.

So it was whenever there were organisational problems, administrative problems, whatever they were, we would help out with, so I got a very wide experience of doing different types of the union work through that - all of us did who worked there - but we weren't specifically involved in any one union at that point - at a later stage the municipal workers union needed a lot of help in sort of restructuring themselves, and they asked me to come onto the executive - it was slightly anomalous thing because I wasn't working for them full time, and I mean I quite clearly wasn't a municipal worker, but they included me in the executive just to help with the restructure thing.

M.R. So I - I functioned there as, if you like, a kind of part time member of that union helping to restructure things, rewrite constitutions and whatnot - and then at a later stage when COSATU was formed, which was obviously quite recently, we then closed the project down because the unions in COSATU were supposed to each - each industrial union would have its own education project internal to that union, and COSATU would have a broad education project for the whole federation, so we couldn't have JUEP existing alongside that.

So we closed JUEP down, and I then wasn't too keen to remain in education and wanted to actually work in a union directly, and I got a job with the railway workers union, South African Railway and Harbours Workers Union as a national organiser.

J.F. South African Railway and Harbours?

M.R. Ja.

J.F. (.....)

M.R. For a period of about eight months - the job was basically to pull the union and sort of jack up a whole lot of things, pull various things together, elect a new executive, just get the administration going etc., etc., which is what I did - I started new branches in a number of areas - and once all that was done then it was a matter of deciding where do I - what do I go onto, and I landed back in education (Laugh) - the union wanted me to take the job of education secretary.

J.F. Is this for Harbour....

M.R. For the South African Railway and Harbours Workers Union, ja.

J.F. So you're now education secretary for them?

M.R. Ja.

J.F. Based in Jo'burg (?)

M.R. Head Office, ja - the Head Office is in Johannesburg - it's a national job.

J.F. Does it mean a lot of travelling?

M.R. Ja - going round to all our different branches and regions.

J.F. And how did you happen to get involved with that union per se?

M.R. It was really just a choice - I mean we went into COSATU, we discussed our involvement and the reshuffling of - of various activists into what were high priority areas and people were divided up, and we saw the Railways and Harbours - it was a union that we had worked with before - it seemed to be a high priority area in terms of the - the industry itself being a very strategic industry - the fact that there were a lot of railway workers, that they were pretty much bottom of the pile when it came to being government employees and the kinds of laws that pertained to them and the sort of salary levels and the way in which they were treated etc., so it was one of the unions that we wanted to channel people into, and just the way we discussed it I ended up being asked to go into that.

J.F. You ever were in YCS or YCW?

M.R. I was - I helped to start YCS.

J.F. When (?)

M.R. YCS, that's another story - YCS was - we were involved in CathSoc, and it was - CathSoc was generally a Catholic student society which was meant to bring together all Catholic students on the campuses, create a kind of community for them - what we tried to do with that is that we tried to use that as a base to challenge people in terms of their commitment to Christianity or Catholicism or whatever, to start asking questions about their own lives, the things they were committed to, the sort of society they lived in etc.

But what became clear to us quite soon was that if you took it too far - if you made it into a sort of fairly committed political community you would not be able to draw in the new students, because I mean student life is obviously a short term process - you there for two or three years, or four years or whatever, and then you leave, and then the new batch comes in and you've got to start all over again, which is fine if you can keep attracting people - now if you achieve a sort of high - what do you call it - high political profile as an organisation, then ordinary Catholic students won't join it any more - in fact that started happening.

So we had to try and think of a way of taking the more committed students further but not alienating some of the - the ordinary average, you know, white South African Catholic students who were just coming to university, so that they would still continue to be attracted to it - I mean the basis for bringing them in was obviously the fact that they were Catholics - so we discussed that a lot, and it was about that time - I think it was '75 or 4 - 5 - Albert went to a conference in Latin America somewhere, and he came into contact there with - he was going to a national Catholic thing and he was representing NCFS, the National Catholic Federation - this was the joint national body of all the CathSocs - and he met some YCS people there and was introduced to the kind of method that they used - they have these little reflection groups which they call review groups, which get together on a weekly basis, and the idea is that they do what they call a review of life where they talk on a much more sort of intense basis - it's a small group of say, five or six people, and they review their lives.

They look at the kinds of things they committed to, what they doing, what their involvements are.....

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M.R. whatever they were doing - whether they students or - who - who were involved in political work or if they just involved in - in their studies, I mean they try and review what they do in their daily lives - they look at their own - their living circumstances as well - the kinds of things they committed to, their relationships, everything - it was meant to be a - a real sort of review of life, if you like, and the idea was they used a little method which was what they called the see-judge-act method, which was just a systematic way of discussing one's involvements, but the idea was that ultimately it would result in action - that it wasn't a sort of academic reflection on what you were doing but that you would look carefully at your life in terms of your Christian commitment, and in the end some action had to result from it - some work would have to be done.

And basically he came back with that, and we decided it would be a very good way of taking the more politically committed people further than they could be taken within the CathSoc environment and that CathSoc should continue and the NCFS should continue to exist as a kind of broad community that was fairly low level politically, so that ordinary people could just keep on coming into it and moving through it, but that the more politically committed people should actually move off into something like YCS.

And so we started the first YCS group - we experimented actually with for a year, just ourselves in a group - that was 1977, and we - we - I think we had a group for about six or eight months, and then we decided to sort of launch YCS in the ad - on the university level - at that point there was a kind of YCS which was functioning amongst white students, school students, that was sort of linked to YCW - now YCW was obviously working amongst young workers, Christian workers, and they just linked to sort of white schools movement to that (?) - it was a very odd kind of link - so when we started YCS at the universities they handed over those white students to us, school students.

We didn't know quite what to do with them, tell you the truth, because it was a totally different thing to what we were doing, but anyway we started YCS at all the universities - first at the white universities then we extended to some of the black universities, and eventually into the black schools as well and started YCS in the black schools - that was a lot of the contact that I had with black school students came through that actually in the beginning, and then later on through those guys we - well, and through other political commitments we met the COSAS people and all that, so that was YCS.

J.F. Just a few little things to ask - when was - did - have you (.....) is to kind of relate all this to the ideological, but that's kind of a summing up question, so before that you've been very much more theoretical and general than specifically, experientially and anecdotally, and I'm just wondering, for all that you've spoken about the realities and parameters and constraints of working in a non-racial way being a white organising black workers - can you tell me anything about what some of your experiences have been like - if you've kind of gone through some of the prejudices of black workers about you or reactions - the responses of bosses - I'm thinking of the - like when you were - maybe you could tell that story of when you went to Britain with Themba and the reactions you'd get from people there.

J.F. I'm just wondering generally what it's like on the ground, how people respond to you - you could say in the Food and Canning Workers Union in the Cape (?) - that nobody would bat an eye because they've seen Jan Theron (?) for years, but generally the workers who are just coming into a union for a first (.....) or whatever, how do they react to you - what have they said to you in your....

M.R. It's very different depending on the levels - I mean I - it's hard to think of specific stories, but I remember there've been meetings - there was one specific meeting - I can't remember which - at what point it was, but it was a meeting - one of the first meetings of this particular union that I attended was a meeting of workers from a specific factory, and the first thing that - that a lot of the workers did was they were a bit surprised to see a white guy there, and it was quite clear from the way in which they looked at me as they walked into the room and kind of (Laugh) give me a sideways glance and then they'd walk on sort of thing.

Later on when it became clear during the course of the meeting that I was actually participating actively and that I was there with the union guys and, you know, when we sang the songs and shouted Amand-las and all that it became quite clear that I was kind of one of there there was a - a different kind of response which in a way was actually a - also a problem - it was a kind of - it was almost like an overenthusiastic response - it was sort of really happy that - or surprised, I suppose, first, and then in a kind of a real sort of welcoming feeling of, you know, you're really welcome amongst us and it's good to see you here, but there wasn't -

I mean in a way it's as much of a problem because until people start treating you normally, just as an ordinary person who's working amongst them, you can't actually properly do work with people - I mean you actually - as a white person you - I mean that meeting gave me a - a - a - there's (?) an example of a whole range of different experiences - from the beginning where there'd be suspicion and people would be very reserved about saying something, and in fact at the beginning of the meeting it was quite hard to get people just to discuss some of the issues because they felt a bit reserved - they wanted - they weren't sure who I was and whether they could talk in front of me - to the end where there's a kind of ever-exaggerated sort of - it's like a release feeling, oh, well, that's nice, he's with us, you know, and then -

But then there's a kind of - it's also a very unnatural response because it's a kind of, you know, that's great and even though you're a white guy you're with us and you really welcome and you - that was nice, but there was also - you can't get into an ordinary working relationship with people - you feel like you can't - you got to be careful what you say in case people take it almost too seriously - you - there's a sort of euphoria which actually prevents the work from - from really happening, which is almost as much of a problem - there're probably lots of examples I could give of that.

There've been situations where I've been in meetings - I remember one where we were discussing some of the problems, and I've got to be quite careful in a situation where people haven't got used to me yet that I don't get too sharply critical of any particular person, because people take it very, very personally, whereas in other situations as (?) an ordinary organiser he (?) - they think the guy's a bit of a whatever they think.

M.R. I mean as an ordinary organiser he's working with them - these are workers who are adults and have got their own opinions - if the guy talks rubbish they just ignore him, you know, and they don't - obviously as an organiser you have a bit more influence than just another ordinary worker, but nonetheless I mean if there's something - but in the beginning I found myself in a situation where people were like taking it too seriously, you know, and that's also a problem - it's a major problem - you can't do your work effectively if you - you don't know that when some - when you say something that's totally inappropriate, and clearly the people who working in that situation will know if it's appropriate or not, people are now (?) going to say to you : Listen, you talking shit, you know (Laugh) like it doesn't make sense - then you - you can't really work properly with those people - I mean it's also a bloody problem.

And it takes until, you know, you can get to the point where people actually just treat you as another person who's working with them who has some skills and maybe has got some things to offer, but ultimately if you - you talking about their situation - they the ones who have to judge whether something is appropriate or not, whether something makes sense or not, whether a particular strategy will work in their factory or not, because they the ones who there, you know.

Now if you can't get people to respond to you normally in that situation you just don't get that sort of feedback, that guidance, you know, that maybe somebody else would get - then there's problems on the level of organisers - quite often what happens, or has happened - I mean another (.....) - tell half a dozen stories about this one, but just to sort of generalise it slightly, there've been situations where in the various structures I've worked on it's become necessary to be quite critical of the way in which certain people work, and not just in a situation of criticism but sometimes when you arguing about different possible strategies, you know, that need to be undertaken.

For example, we - in the Municipal Workers Union we were encountering quite a lot of problems in organising a specific area, and we had differences of opinion about how to approach organising that area, and the one organiser - in fact two of the organisers were very resentful of me, and I only discovered later that what was really happening - I couldn't understand why they were always - ja, so I was getting a lot of sort of negative feelings from the guys, and I mean what actually came out after a long time was that they felt that the only reason why people were listening to me as opposed to - to them was because I was more articulate and that I was more educated, and they resented that and it was - it had to do with being a white guy.

I mean there's lots of very articulate black guys in the union who - who were just as dismissive of some of the - the problematic ideas that these guys were coming up with, but they were reacting to me because they sort of felt, you know, and I'd kind of - I'd had an education and I had a sort of background, I could articulate my ideas better and therefore people were listening to me rather than to them - so that sort of problem you have to overcome as well so that people just start treating you in the same way as -

I mean if Sidney had been there and made the same bloody arguments, and I've been in situations where that's actually happened, nobody responds to him in that way - nobody would actually react on that level, so you've just got to be more sensitive, I suppose, and you've got to actually be able to work through that kind of thing and not feel kind of totally devastated every time that happens and you end up being sort of taking ten steps back as far as sort of day to day problems go.

M.R. There's other things and that's again got to do more with a sort of political culture thing, where initially it's quite difficult for - I mean I've worked together with - with some people for a long time, but on a sort of political level it's quite difficult for people to just instinctively trust me until they've got to a certain point in the relationship with me - I'm talking about now political discussions and - and things about say, that might involve something that happened in the townships, like something being blown up and them expressing an opinion on it - something like that - on a spontaneous level - the way in which guys treat just another black activist who they don't know from a bar of soap but who happens to come from the township and - and they know that his political opinions are generally progressive - the way in which they - they would speak in front of him is very different to the way in which they would speak in front of me initially, and it takes a much longer time for me to - to establish that level of trust with people than it does for just an ordinary black activist, and that's just the reality.

I mean people don't know you - they - instinctively their feelings are sort of mistrustful, if you like, of whites - they don't generally expect whites to be political - and you've got to actually do more, if you like, to establish your credibility - well, I - I'm talking now more on a personal level - I'm not talking about sort of showing yourself to be a great political activist or anything, but so that that particular person feels easy with you.

J.F. And you wouldn't - you don't do much work with management.....

M.R. Ja, I have - there's been some really funny situations negotiating with management, because we've had - I remember one situation where we went to negotiate at a particular factory, and the management - there were only two of us - three of us - all three organisers in this particular case - there was a big crisis at that factory - it was a - a steel factory, and the management was complaining - this guy was not used to trade unions at all - he was a - a Jewish chap who actually owned the factory himself - it was his own place, you know, and he was really like irritated because he felt that these workers were not taking his problems and prerogatives seriously.

I mean he wasn't used to a thing of negotiating with trade unions about the rights of workers - in fact he thought it was quite a big imposition that this bloody union was kind of barging in from the outside and telling him what to do in his own workplace type of thing, so it was that sort of attitude - and the funny thing was he treated me totally differently to the way he treated the other organisers - I mean he - when he was speaking about some of the problems he would - he would (Laugh) - he would address it to me as if to say : You know, these guys, I mean you know what they do - I'm - I'm representing the union there - now I've just come in with these guys - we all three from the union, and he's talking to me as if I was a third party about the union, you see, and he'd say : These guys don't listen and they don't know - it was really funny, and he had to actually stop him and say : You know, I'm also part of the union so you better kind of address me as if I - you know, we part of the same thing and it doesn't make sense to kind of speak of me as if I'm some kind of a neutral third party because I'm not, you know - and it's a problem of black, white things again.

M.R. Management generally if you go with negotiations, and that's another problem which - I'm not sure how it happens in other unions, but I often found it a problem - they'd address a lot of what they say to me - they find it easier to talk to a white person than they do to talk to black - and particularly to talk to some of their own workers - I mean they found that generally very insulting in the beginning when they first dealing with unions - generally I mean the way it works is they'd rather address a union official than workers who work in their own factory because then they giving them too much importance, and then beyond that amongst the union officials if I was with they would address me.

And yet you have to do things actively to break that down - I mean generally if that was happening I'd have to just keep quiet and just not say anything, and they would just have to talk to the other union officials - and then where it was important for me to intervene I would, you know, and sort of contribute in whatever way I could, but it's - ja, it's an additional problem, ad you can't allow it to - to continue - I mean you can't let management get away with trying to sort of not talk to the union officials, you know, and sort of talk to the whities because they find it -

I mean I was also a union official, but to the white union officials rather than to the black ones, or ignoring the workers and rather talking to me type of thing.

J.F. And what about when you've been out of South Africa, do people kind of do a double-take when they see you?

M.R. I remember when I went to Canada (Laugh) I was with a - a particular group, and we were just talking about some of the problems and what was happening and - ad I was talking to one group of - of trade unionists, and the one comment the guy made - I think we were talking about - well, they were asking me all sorts of questions about union work and about problems of the struggle in South Africa - in the end the one guy said something like : Ja, it's amazing in South Africa, you know, you - you can never tell that a person's - whether a person's black or white - I mean some - some people look actually quite, you know, the same ad yet the one's classified (?) - it was quite clear he thought I was black per - a black person, or classified as a black person, just because of the way in which I'd been speaking, which was really funny - I mean I kid of laughed and sort of -

And I mean it was - it was very difficult for him to understand how I couldn't be a black person and be discussing things the way I was - I mean that's really what the reality was - not so much the - and it was just the sort of bit of cognitive dissonance there, just - and the only way he could reconcile it was to assume that I was somehow a black person who looked white type of thing - but it has actually been a problem I mean in other situations where people just - they can't understand now why are you as a white person now coming to talk on behalf of a black trade union, you know, type of thing.

And I mean the reality is it's - it's not always - in fact in a lot of cases it's actually not a good thing to be the person who's representing the union in those types of situations because, ag, you've got to take people's own prejudices into account, if you like, or their own instinctive response, you know - regardless of whether I have been asked by the union and maybe I've got a passport and it's easier for me to do it and perhaps they can't spare somebody else to do it etc., there're also some good reasons for the union sending me.

M.R. The reality is when you meet people there I can represent our case in the most fantastic way possible - I mean I can actually tell them everything that's happening - I can perhaps explain things really clearly, give people an overview - it doesn't have the same impact as it does to have a black organiser or worker there, and that's the reality - and I mean generally when we go on these trips it's to try and win support for something or other - maybe to raise some money - maybe just to get people to understand why it's important to campaign in solidarity with the - the problems that workers have in that situation - it has more impact when you've got a black person, and that's the reality, so it makes more sense to actually send people who can do that - black people.

J.F. Do you think it makes sense to try to inculcate some lessons of non-racialism - maybe those people who made the comments about you learned about the non-racial aspect of the struggle - or is that not a priority?

M.R. Ja - it's difficult - I mean we - generally when we go overseas and represent the union I mean it - it's with regard to a fairly specific purpose - there are the general political purposes of helping people to understand the situation better and the kinds of things they should be supporting etc., but it's the immediate goals, I suppose, that - that - that usually preoccupy us most, and it's in terms of those goals being most effective that we - we do always try and get people to understand the non-racial thing - it is difficult to understand, and maybe sometimes it helps.

Like when Themba and I and Kisa (?) travelled together it actually helped quite a lot because there - you know, there was a kind of mixture, if you like, and it became clear to people what the - a little bit of what the non-racial thing meant, and they could, you know - they could kind of see it in front of them and they could raise questions about it and it was easy to deal with it, but it's not necessarily useful to always do it that - that way.

I mean it's really (very) silly to pretend that non-racialism means that, you know, we have blacks and whites acting in the same way in the trade unions and it doesn't really matter who they are, and it's not true, you know - there's a bloody handful of whites in the unions, and non-racialism there doesn't mean that blacks and whites just participate equally - the subtleties are very difficult for people to understand, so it's not worth actually going into in great depth - what it - what -

All we want to really get across to people is we'll treat anybody equally who comes in - we're not going to - we're not going to discriminate against them because they come from, you know, sort of a group that has a different skin colour or whatever, but obviously we work within the realities too, and we have to cope with those problems.

J.F. Are you on COSATU central executive committee?

M.R. Ja, I represent our union there.

J.F. You represent the union, so every union has a member (?) - how big is the exec.?

M.R. It's huge - it's about 90 people on the central executive committee - it's a - we have - the bigger unions have four delegates and the smaller unions have two - we have two.

- M.R. And then there's an elected NEC that is part of the CEC - the national executive committee - that's - that's basically the office-bearers plus I think five other elected members.
- J.F. So you're not on that?
- M.R. No.
- J.F. And who's the president of your union?
- M.R. Bahi - Elijah Bahi (?) - he's from the National Union of Mineworkers originally - well, he still is - he's a worker on one of the mines, Carltonville Mine.
- J.F. And he's from - he's the president - he's president of COSATU.
- M.R. You're talking about our union?
- J.F. Ja.
- M.R. Oh, sorry - no, our union is - there's a chap who's a - he works at the airport, Jan Smuts - well, you see, we don't actually just organise railways and harbours - we actually organise railways, harbours and airways, because in South Africa SATS, the South African Transport Services, controls all of that - it's the government corporation etc., etc., so we organise anybody who works for SATS basically - and our president, whose name I can't think of, would you believe - it's funny, you know, I've had such a block about names while I've been on holiday here - people keep asking me names of people at home and I can't think of them - Justice Langa - I work with the guy every day - his name's Langa - Justice Langa - he's an airport worker - we -
- Ja, we have executive members from all over the country, but the president happens to be from Jan Smuts Airport in Jo'burg.
- J.F. And I think the last thing I wanted to ask you was, does your belief in non-racialism - do you think for the workers that you deal with that they have a commitment to non-racialism that they see is integrally related to their ideology - from your experience, in your own belief, in the belief of the workers you work with, is non-racialism a kind of a nice overlay or is it something that's structurally part of - is it a tiny aspect - is it ultimately a big aspect - how was it that COSATU actually gave up 150,000 extra workers in CUSA over this issue called non-racialism - I'm just asking for a kind of wrap-up question, is it important that I'm asking these questions about non-racialism - am I getting a bit carried away - is it something that's, as you've said, it's not - it can't actually - it's got obstacles to work itself out even at - especially at this stage etc. - I'm just asking you to kind of put it to perspective how you see it building (?) your experience, your beliefs, and those that you work with which (?) you work with black workers.
- M.R. Mmm - I think it is fundamental, but it's fundamental in - not necessarily in the way in which often, you know, people would interpret it and I - I think often they would assume that - that non-racialism means ignoring race, and it certainly doesn't mean that - I mean I think basically non-racialism has a almost like a principle - emerges out of a situation where we - we have had to deal with racial discrimination, exploitation based on race, divisions amongst people, suspicions, very deep-rooted now.

M.R. I mean at this point it's a very deep-rooted kind of gap between people in South Africa, and that I suppose what it really means to us is we need to be committed to the kind of orientation that will help us to overcome those kinds of divisions, and in fact what it is it's a way of working, and it's also a goal for the future society - it's - the way of working is that it's important for us in the process of struggle to try and attempt to overcome those big deep divisions - that it's important for us to always try and treat people in - on the basis of whether they committed to fighting for justice in South Africa and not on the basis of what skin colour they happen to be born with on the one hand - and on the other hand recognising that overcoming those divisions is not just a matter of stating that those divisions must be overcome - it's a process - it -

It's got to be worked out in the course of struggle in terms of the practical problems that we might face, whether it's in unions or any other organisations - so it is fundamental because I think people feel that the only way we will structure a truly just and free South Africa is if we can overcome those inherited problems, and that those things must be overcome in that process of struggle - that it has to be in that way - a fundamental principle upon which the struggle is based.

J.F. One aspect of that - lately there's been this debate - lately certain quarters have appropriated left as their domain (?) and said that other unions, other points of views, other groupings are shying away from socialism - is that something that comes up - when you're dealing with black workers - from your perspective can you say something about this assertion of socialism versus the kind of carrying on in the national democratic struggle?

M.R. Mmm - ja, I think it does come up in the course of our work, particularly within the trade unions, because what happens is workers are often discussing what kind of society we working for - I mean we working to overcome these problems, but the moment you get beyond the immediate problems then you start saying : O.K., well, what do we actually want - I mean what are we working for, which direction are we taking - and I think discussions about what type of society or what type of broad social system we want are a necessary part of - of ordinary trade union work, and that it is really important for people to understand what socialism is about and what kinds of society or different kinds - the way in which different kinds of social systems actually affect the rights of ordinary workers and their possibilities of participating in the political structure and control of the economic structure etc.

The thing that becomes a big problem for us is that there are people within the trade unions who approach the whole question of socialism in a very abstract and academic way, and what I mean by that is it's almost like something has been brought in from outside of the experience of workers here in this country - it - it's an abstract goal which all workers have, or should have, and they present it as this is the kind of society we working for and therefore this is the type of politics we committed to and everything else must be tempered by that - and we find that strange because we don't think that ordinary people can conduct a political struggle in that way.

M.R. What really happens, and I think the best way for anybody to understand politics and to become really committed to fighting for certain goals is to be able to understand the way in which your present experience and your present problems can lead one into a struggle which helps you to overcome those problems, and then in terms of the kind of extrapolation of that experience what is the long term goal that you working for.

In other words how do you root your goal for this kind of long term society in your every day struggles now - the experience that you facing as a worker, black worker in a factory - the kinds of problems you have in the community - the sorts of problems your kids are having - the only way a person becomes really committed to fighting for something that's going to be very difficult, a very long and hard struggle, is if the person can actually root that goal in their every day experience and understand how it will actually help as part of a process of - of struggling against all these big problems that one faces.

And so when it (?) - we would try and introduce our aim for - in terms of what type of society we struggling for, is it would - it would really be based on what sorts of problems a worker is having now - what are we trying to fight to overcome - why are the kids fighting certain things in the schools - why are the civics battling on the streets with - with the army that's occupying the townships - why are people fighting for street committees or - or having to sort of assert themselves in whole range of different areas - why are they fighting against detentions in this country - and part of that process is an attempt to get people to understand that we fighting for liberation generally, and the way in which we going to achieve liberation is to fight together with a whole range of different groups in terms of these types of problems that face us, and the only way we going to achieve liberation is if we have some kind of overwhelming force that stands united against the government in terms of all these problems.

Beyond that it's quite clear that amongst us we do have differences, amongst the people who fighting for that liberation - so it's possible that some people in fighting for that liberation are prepared to go only half way down the road, O.K. - the rest of us may want to go all the way down that road - point is it's the same road, and that it's very important for that unity to happen if we to win that struggle - and that's really what we try and get people to understand in the process of - of organising - so you win certain battles in a particular factory because all the workers in that factory are united - you might win something in the whole industry because you can get the whole industry to stand with you - you've organised all the factories in that industry.

You can win an education struggle - perhaps a small struggle within the township because all the people within that township are actually united - so what we actually trying to say to people is we - as part of your experience of every day struggle, the broader the unity that we can achieve in terms of our political goals the more likely we are to be able to achieve those goals - but it's also true that some people won't necessarily want to take it as far as maybe we do, so we need to understand where we going, and that's the context in which we would introduce socialism - that it's part of that process of struggle - that as workers - very often workers will have a different orientation will want to - to make the changes much more fundamental, much more far-reaching, perhaps transform the society further than others may want to in the long run.

M.R. In the short run our aim is to actually unite all those people and to ensure that workers are a very fundamental part of that whole process of struggle, so that nobody can sell us out on the way - we can keep the struggle going - the nonsense that comes from some of the others involved is really very weird - I mean it's a hell of an abstract thing - it's a divisive thing - it's an attempt to isolate workers off from the rest of the community - it's a - it's a kind of exclusive worker politics thing, which actually in the end ends up divorcing people from some of the immediate very practical struggles that are going on around them from day to day in the hope that this abstract politics will somehow realise itself over and above all this kind of messy politics that's going on now.

And it really - if anything it keeps people out of political struggles rather than gets them involved in them - that's why we oppose them - so very often when people talk about socialism I mean we get really irritated because what they actually doing in the long run is they - they being - we forced to oppose them because their notion of socialism is not rooted anywhere - it doesn't make any sense - it's not a - it's not a struggle notion - it's not a - it's a - what did somebody call it - it's not socialism, it's sociology - in other words it - it's academic - you know, it's not actually a real process - and that in fact what they doing is they just getting people turned off the process of struggle - they withdrawing them from the practical every day struggle and they actually preventing that process from really starting, and in some ways they demeaning the whole concept of socialism anyway - becomes a major problem.

We end up with our people sort of referring ironically to the so-called socialists (Laugh)

J.F. What's the membership of your union?

M.R. Within the railway sector?

J.F. Why do you say that (?) - I thought it was railways, harbour and airport (?)

M.R. Oh, yes, no, sorry, I didn't know whether you meant sort of COSATU or - we've got about 11,000 members nationally now.

J.F. And when did it start?

M.R. Well, there's a number of - you see, SACTU - originally SARWHU was a - existed actually from 1936, but it's been sort of persecuted out of existence a number of different times - it was part of CONETU in the '40s - it then sort of died out - SACTU then - either SACTU revived it or it revived just before SACTU, I'm not a hundred percent sure, but (?) it was actually an affiliate member of SACTU during those days.....

END OF INTERVIEW.