

Collection Number: AL3290

Project Name: Anti Privatisation Forum

Date of Interview: 2010-02-19

Location of Interview: Johannesburg

Language/s of interview: English

Length of interview: 1st 2:03:40/2nd 0:8:34

Name of interviewer: Dale McKinley

Name of interviewee/s: Ahmed Veriava

Name of translator (if any):

Name of transcriber: Olga R Pickover and Selpahi Sibanda

Notes on access and use (if any):

Audio file name/s of interview: AL3290_Veriava Ahmed_2010-02-19



Dale: OK, now it is the 19th correct?

Ahmed: Ja

Dale: 19th of February and I am about to interview Ahmed Veriava. Ahmed thanks again for your time. By this stage you probably know we have quite difficult, different questions, but, just state your full name please.

Ahmed: Ahmed Veriava.

Dale: Ahmed before we get into the discussion on the APF history and your own experiences and perspectives, we want to know a little bit about yourself; where and when were you born?

Ahmed: I was born in 1974, I was born in Johannesburg, at the time my parents were living in Lens [Lenasia]

Dale: Okay, and have you always lived in Joburg, or have you moved around?

Ahmed: I've lived a bit in a place called Laudium, out in Pretoria and I also stayed a bit in Cape Town but not for any long period. Most of my life has been spent in Johannesburg

Dale: In Johannesburg?

Ahmed: In Lens and then later in Mayfair

Dale: Alright, just tell us a little bit about your family, your brothers, sisters, parents?

Ahmed: I've got a sister that shares my mum, who has passed on now, and then I have a brother and sister from my father's second marriage. My mum, she basically worked in a number of jobs at some point in the bank, later doing telemarketing, that kind of stuff. My dad is a doctor, until quite recently he was based at Helen Joseph hospital.

Dale: And ... the family, when did you start living, well you know, when did you take off from the family nest?

Ahmed: Eish It's a complicated story, and one that we probably don't need to go into, but the first time I left home I was in Standard 9 and then after went and stayed at ... basically because my parents were split and I sort of moved between them for most of my childhood and adolescence. But from around Standard 9 I was quite independent and was more of a boarder in their houses than anything else ... from about Standard 9 I started kind of moving away and then went to stay with my mum and then university I stayed with my father again for bits of it, went back to my mum, moved out for a while, moved back home; it's not a clear.....

Dale: Okay and schooling, tell us a little bit about your schooling and how far you've gone?

Ahmed: Oh I went all the way. So basically also schooling is a very complicated issue, which we don't need to go into. I changed schools fourteen times, so we are not going into that.

Dale: Fourteen times?

Ahmed: Fourteen times, yeah, so we are not going to go into that. However, I finally finished at Johannesburg Secondary School which is, used to be in Fordsburg and then moved premises to the old white school in Homestead Park.

Dale: And then after high school?

Ahmed: After high school I went to University for six months, decided that I was hungering for something that wasn't at University and so spent the next two years, or next year and a half kind of in the "proverbial middle class" experience of finding oneself.

Dale: And then you went back.

Ahmed: Ja and then I went back to University from '96 until 2000 and I did a BA English and Philosophy majors and then did a Honours jointly in English and Politics.

Dale: And since then, have you pursued any further studies?

Ahmed: Well I'm sort of going back now. I am not exactly sure of what I am doing, writing a thesis and that's what I am doing at the moment in terms of kind of academic work, but it's not really that separate from kind of intellectual labour that's taken whole, taken route you know in the last ten years to a whole range of projects that I've been involved in.

Dale: Okay then we would probably come back to some of those I am sure. Just give us - and please feel free to talk about any aspect that you want - how you came to be politicised, how you entered sort of in the political role of activism?

Ahmed: Okay it's not, it's not as easy a question as I would like it to be, but basically I grew up in a family that was, or my fathers' side of the family was very involved in the BC (Black Consciousness) movement and my dad at some point served in the executive side of AZAPO. And in the '80s my uncle was from SASO and so forth. And you know as a kid, I'd always been within that political milieu and kind of tagging along to meetings and so forth, but my own kind of political work, in my own name and kind of engaged activism of some sort probably began in 1988 when I entered high school. I think one of the things that somewhat, you know about that particular period, and especially for me it doesn't exist anymore at least not just in Indian communities, but high schools were very politicised spaces, so one immediately entered into a kind of ready made political community on coming into high school. And I think in this context there was an organisation called Lenasia Students' Congress and it was really within the Lenasia Students Congress that I had my real first political experiences ...

Dale: Okay and tell us...

Ahmed: That basically was ... the kind of formative period of my own understanding of what doing politics meant, so that was my politicisation and it's context was specifically the kinds of struggles that were undertaken by scholars in the '80's ... although when I had already been there, SRC's were already formed, but it was also kind of building those SRC's and building kind of a political voice for students, scholars in school. And then as well, opposition to the kinds of apartheid-era municipal and House of Delegates, their kind of attempts at drawing in sections of the Indian community into those kind of formations of apartheid, the political era of apartheid for Indians.

Dale: Okay, now after that initial introduction as you say to the political world, give us an indication from that point on and you know, through the rest of your schooling about your politics or organisations you belong to and what were you active in, doing from that point on, those initial years of the 80s/mid-'80's?

Ahmed: I mean, I don't want to do this because it is quite a long history and it could take quite sometime, but there were certain kind of moments where, around Standard 7, Standard 8 we tried to form an AZASM branch and has a little bit of friction with people that I worked with in that school who were not keen on seeing me in AZAPO, AZASM, gain presence within Lenasia, which they hadn't at the time. I was also kind of roped in by a guy who has passed on now, Haroon Vally to work on the Conference for Democratic Future. I mean I really didn't do that much, kind of helped with kind of some of the coordination for accommodation but it was an important kind of moment for me because I think it was within the Conference for a Democratic Future and particularly in the kind of push from the side of Congress for the adoption of the - I think it was the Organisation of African Unity – which was basically the kind of document that secured the buy-in of the Congress movement into this document is what set the stage for the acceptance of the negotiated process. What actually happened there was that the BC movement as well as I think a number of other formations opposed the OAU declaration; that was kind of pushed through somewhat problematically, I think it was, anyway let's not get into that history ... anyway, that moment was an important one for me just in kind of situating myself in terms of a political trajectory that was unfolding around the negotiated, or toward a negotiated settlement. After that I actually, my kind of inclination to anti-systemic behaviour took a different turn and I found myself less involved in politics, in somewhat socially destructive behaviour some would say and was only really then again, although I mean I continued to read you know and I continued with marches and stuff like that. I only became more organisationally involved again then when I returned to campus, and not in 1994, in 1996.

Dale: And that was with SASCO.

Ahmed: And that was, ja through joining SASCO.

Dale: From that point then ... because there was an aspect of that in your political formation or experience which was from an early point, even prior to '94 some of your political ideas were formed by the opposition to what was already being set as the transitional framework?

Ahmed: Well, do you want me to speak to that?

Dale: Yes please, I think it's very important.

Ahmed: Look it, I mean I was quite immature at the time and my kind of orientation to it kind of reflected more a family badge than actually a kind of a deep orientation to the actual questions that were being engaged with. Nevertheless I kind of had grown out of a political tradition whose one of its fundamental premises was 'non-collaboration with the oppressor and his political instruments' which was one of those phrases which I may have gotten wrong but it was somewhere there in the Azanian People's Manifesto. And at the very least I mean I sort of read the transition period through the lens of that premise. But I think there was a lot also that was happening ... you also have to remember that I belonged to a kind of weird generation and a particular class of a generation who grew up with my dad telling me shit like you know, "one day my son when you are old enough, you know what I mean you are going to the bush"; so you sort of have a particular idea of a kind of cathartic confrontation you know what I mean, that is now no longer and that the very injustices that were meant to be sorted out within that are going to fall by the way of compromise. Now, the somewhat romantic image of a kind of teenager growing up in a family that bred that romanticism; and so I think that did mediate to some extent how I read that period of the 1990's, but over and above that I think there were other things that were happening for instance, that made that narrative real over a kind of departure that was now setting aside the very goals that had driven the liberation movement. It wasn't anything simple as a kind of sell out although it might have been some reference in my mind that could have been as simple as a sell out kind of thesis, but there were very real disappointments that I felt by the ANC, by the inability to, for instance confront the Nationalist Party around what was happening around the third force and in some sense also you know, an inability to even grasp that the world order had somewhat changed in any kind of aspiration towards communism you know, made me seem a bit loony.

Dale: You felt that yourself?

Ahmed: Ja I mean that was part of the context of the period.

Dale: Sorry I am just going to follow this is for a bit; how did you feel when '94 happened, when the formal structures of apartheid were basically taken away and all of a sudden you don't have to identify yourself and everything doesn't necessarily revolve around colour of your skin?

Ahmed: See this is another weird thing; I've spoken to Prishan about this. Growing up, I mean certainly I'd go to Pretoria and you go to kind of Sterland, which was a kind of cinemas in Pretoria and then you know you have a very real kind of sense of racism in the gaze of white people. But I never imagined myself as the subject that was, as a subject to be liberated as such. I mean I grew up in the middle class household as such, so the kind of political inspiration for the stuff that I got involved in you know

stemmed not from a sense of not wanting to free myself from oppression but from creating some sort of idea of a just society, which never was personalised to I think the degree where I saw myself as a victim of apartheid - I don't know if that makes sense? I know it was later on and especially when I went to university and when you, in fact on the other side of the transition when you actually in relationships, unequal relationships with white people that you see and are physically in some sort of real physical proximity you know and I mean that kind of sense of what oppression and so forth, maybe made more sense to me. But as a kid, I mean you're growing up in an Indian area where, you know the majority of the people around you are, you know, the white people I met were my fathers' friends who were lefties you know what I mean so, I didn't have that kind of sense of these kind of structural impasses, or these kind of structural bars that prohibited me from going anywhere, because my world was these townships, which you know within those townships the people being exploited and being exploited by Indian people, were African people. So I mean I certainly understood some of my father's frustrations and had a sense of them, but you don't really grapple with them on a personal level in the same way until you are older I think.

Dale: Okay so...

Ahmed: I am sorry I don't know if that makes sense?

Dale: No, no there is certainly no need to apologise; I'm asking these questions because I think they are important in terms of the formation of a lot of things. Post 1994, you started getting involved in SASCO, just tell us a little bit about that and how, where that went in terms of politically as things were changing in the country?

Ahmed: I mean I never went into SASCO as a Congressite, I mean I was never what was affectionately called in the BC movement a 'varara' you know, so I came in already with a somewhat of a real suspicion around the ANC but then SASCO was a natural place to be for a student militant at university. I mean I had disagreements with people over a range of things as one could imagine; what the relationship with SASCO should be to the ANC, the tenor of its critique of the economic policies which were being adopted, besides it was really around '96 when I was active in SASCO or began to become active in SASCO and you know it's around that period that all of these debates begin to unfold. So you know within those kinds of contexts you know that is what defined the kind of ideological milieu of the kind of early debates that I experienced within SASCO. But also I think more than that, a particular kind of contestation of the very concept of transformation and what was that to mean and I think for people like myself, you know and for Prishani and a wide range of other people, it was about pushing that concept of transformation which was, which actually came ... actually in Universities that kind of issue of University transformation was put on the agenda by the student movement and at the same time it became subject to a kind of political appropriation by the administration. So the administration claimed that they were in the process as part of a kind of national, within the national context of a kind of process of transformation and at the time there were things like FACT, Further Accelerated Campus Transformation which you know brought so called stakeholders into the kind of corporatist framework that was being punted at the time, and it was also within those kind of forums and around them that a

certain contestation over the notion of transformation occurred where those who were inclined, depending on how far to the left, would attempt to push this notion of this transformation to a more radical character. So I think those were the nature of the kinds of things that we were engaged in at the time, I mean there were obviously specific campaigns related to academic and financial exclusions and so forth, but you know they all nevertheless were folded back into a narrative of the necessity of transformation and contesting what transformation actually meant; battles that I would add that we basically, given our very modest idea of what transformation was supposed to entail, that was pretty hegemonic at the beginning of the mid '90's in SASCO, that we can count as lost. Although, you know there is no kind of university in South Africa who can't point to some sort of transformation programme that they've undertaken I think those were very much watered down tremendously from what had initially been envisaged within the student movement.

Dale: Okay and that was from '96 onwards?

Ahmed: No, no that's an ongoing process that's still underway.

Dale: No, I mean with SASCO in particular, I mean when you are involved with SASCO.

Ahmed: No, no right through university.

Dale: Right through university and when did, the year, what was the year that you left university?

Ahmed: 2000.

Dale: 2000, so, all pretty much throughout the mid-late 90s.

Ahmed: In fact around the time that the APF was formed ... in fact the APF is sort of the point of transition from a student activist to a grown-up activist.

Dale: Out of that context?

Ahmed: Out of that student movement,

Dale: So give us a perspective how in that late 1990's period what was going on, your activism in SASCO the things that you were involved in began to gradually lead you toward something like the APF, which eventually became the APF should I say.

Ahmed: Say that again.

Dale: Okay. I was saying during that late 1990's period, how is it that ... tell us something about what you guys were doing at SASCO and how that politics and how that activism, that student context led you to what eventually became the APF?

Ahmed: Okay there is two ways of answering this question, one in terms of a kind of development of personal politics that then articulated what was happening in the APF and then there is also a specific set of events and a struggle on campus that feeds into the formation of the APF.

Dale: See if you can bring those two together.

Ahmed: I mean I'll just speak to the one and then the other and hopefully they'll start to make sense together. So in terms of my own kind of development ... the points or the line of influence of my kind of political development, I'd always been somewhat sceptical of the kind of left or, as it moves away from nationalism which it never really ever gets away from, the kind of left tradition that was associated with the Congress movement that probably in its best expression was maybe the Communist Party at a particular point although I'm not really sure of that. I have always been kind of critical of that narrative of the communist hypothesis, of the narrative of a communist movement so I think part of, if I am little bit kind to myself, part of what we were doing in SASCO in the kind of twin context of both a kind of pragmatism that supposedly were to define how we were to approach this period of the transition as well as the broader global context in which communist movements all over the world were somewhat on the retreat, was also to attempt to kind of re-imagine what that meant to us or being a communist now and what those kind of struggles meant for us here in South Africa. And I think also from around '99 you see the kind of emergence of that kind of Seattle movement, but also partly influenced by a post structuralist canon and the critique of epistemological certainties of mainstream left movements, there was at least for me at the time the kind of need to give that some kind of practical form to what they were doing on campus. In real terms though, and in terms of actual events there was also - understand there were a lot of things that were like similar to what was happening more broadly in society that were happening on campus, so in the same way as you know we understand that forums like FACT and so forth and the kind of participation in things like the University Council and so forth who were actually winning us very little and in many ways were binding us to processes that our political inclination was to oppose. At the same time we needed to defend these things as our victories and you know there was certain kind of discomfort with that and I think that discomfort crystallised in relation to the kind of the outsourcing of non-core services at the university, the so called privatisation programme that was undertaken under Colin Bundy; because I mean after all this was a decision taken in council and SRC as well and NEHAWU participated on Council ... its justification was given in the language of transformation, so even the kind of curriculum restructuring that was happening had a very kind of neo-liberal tint you know, those faculties that were financially viable were being slashed at the same time; that same logic that was operative in the idea that you need to outsource non-core services and casualise or rather kind of limit the amount of people that are working directly for the university. So as well as I mean there are certain things that we never got properly a grasp of, with links between students and academics you know, but also the kind of casualisation of academic labour which was also being part of that process. We understood to some degree but perhaps not as well as we should but nonetheless it was around these things that this personal political kind of trajectory, kind of seemed to articulate with. Does that make sense? I mean let me just finish what I am saying to you alright.

Dale: Absolutely.

Ahmed: So I mean I think it was in that context but this also placed us in another kind of personal, see From about '98, actually more '99, I was less kind of active in the branch - when there was a certain campaign that I felt strongly about I'd throw myself into the work and you know do my best to make it a success, but generally I kind of was frustrated with branch life. And my own remobilisation was partly due to a first year student who came in at the time, Daniel Hutchinson whose energy and willingness to also try new things and so forth on campus helped me to re-find a place in the organisation. It was in this context and I think also when the whole kind of restructuring thing hit it was around exam time, towards the end of the year. So being able to build a campaign around it was not that easy. Nonetheless we devoted a substantial amount of energy in trying to build a campaign and also to kind of inventing the face of a campaign where there was less of one; and also you know at the time NEHAWU was somewhat handicapped in so far that they had to go through some kind of CCMA process before they could undertake any kind of antagonistic forms of protest on campus. So they were restricting themselves to lunch time protests and we saw certain opportunities to perhaps use the cover that students had, to undertake somewhat more antagonistic actions. Perhaps the most antagonistic of them that was undertaken was the occupation of the Vice Chancellor's office by Daniel Hutchinson, James Pendlebury, mainly student leaders from SASCO, the PG, the Post Graduate Association and the SRC and for which they received interdicts, interdicting them against any further action of that sort. I just thought I'd clarify that because it came up.

Dale: No, those are the kind of events and experiences that as I said led you towards ... so just give a little more, from that point on, you did these actions then...?

Ahmed: Alright, I am going to jump around, you know how I am ... so one of the things that you know is possibly going to be interesting in terms of the outcomes of this is how the kind of the formation of a particular structure looks very different depending on where the particular people are standing at the time at which it was coming in to being. For us I think and again Daniel Hutchinson plays a very important role here, because Daniel Hutchinson and Nick Dieltiens are simultaneously sitting on the Anti Igoli forum, the Johannesburg branch of the Communist Party attending meetings as well as part of the Wits campaign. And on campus as I think we kind of realise that it's going to be very difficult for us to win this campaign without broadening it, then also at the same time you know the kind of momentum around SAMWU protests are also starting to begin in relation to the Igoli plan. We saw in these the hopeful possibility of potentially making more kind of real connections with, or kind of establishing something of a broad front against neo-liberal privatisation. Which at the time also it was more of a, I mean we can talk about that, remind me to come back to that because I think it also - neo liberal privatisation was also a particular kind of watchword in the political language of the left at the time. Anyway, and I think it was within that context that we were able then, that we undertook to establish certain kinds of meetings with different organisations to try and kind of bring together forces that could fight, could broaden this campaign. And I think at the time the meetings that we had, the initial meetings were I think, we came to the Communist Party branch meeting that you were chairing, very

difficult meeting I might add - I didn't really understand why it was a difficult meeting. And then of course the kind of activist forums at COSATU House where we took a decision to target the Urban Futures Conference which I might also add, that at least from our side the targeting of that conference did owe something to the inspiration of Seattle, a kind of conference bashing and I think we wanted our own mini Seattle and I think that even now that is how Patrick Bond may have even written it up afterwards...

Dale: Despite the fact that...

Ahmed: Also this is another important kind of thing, I think in Nic's interview and Prishani's it's a little bit kind of, I mean it's absolutely true what happened but you know the kind of position that was taken by Patrick was one that we would return to a couple of times in the history of the APF. This was this idea of inside- outside and where there's a potentially a grouping of progressive forces do we find ourselves outside of what is nevertheless a somewhat contentious process or do we go inside and try and win the argument there? So Patrick at the time was far more inclined to the inside, and I think his own personal investments within the Urban Futures conference meant that he didn't want to see that kind of broken apart. And as a result he called me and Nick which was also a kind of shitty way of doing it because there was a much broader kind of grouping taking place at which he offered us 80 tickets in order for us to participate in the conference. And I remember at the first activist forum, this was my kind of public critique of Patrick Bond, I called him a petty bourgeois intellectual who was trying to extinguish the militancy of this forum or whatever - so this is also a little kind of nice little theatre around that. The kind of actions that unfolded around Urban Futures which I think was important - there were a number of prior attempts by the way, you know what I mean to bring together progressive left elements within Johannesburg and certainly a lot of people were looking to this kind of grouping around the Urban Futures conference with certain kinds of real ambitions. I remember Daniel coming to my flat really upset that he had seen on a board Wiseman and Salim were having a meeting about the future of this particular kind of forum and where it would potentially lead to ... the kind of various disparate Trotskyist cells that kind of populated Johannesburg you know and I mean certainly it was part of a long line of attempts at opening up and it was a kind of a schizophrenic thing because on the one hand they didn't want to move too far away from COSATU and the Alliance and at the same time you know, wanting to have something outside and antagonistic to that political tradition. So it allowed for those kinds of forces who had a particular kind of hope for the left in Johannesburg, something new for them to at least be hopeful about in relation to their own politics, of course. But I think what was specific about the APF and what separated it from previous, similar kinds of discussion groups like CANSA even the Anti-Igoli Forum itself, was that this particular activist forum was orientated towards forms of direct action and building a kind of common, a kind of sense of belonging together as a political entity through actual forms of struggle and that was immediately expressed in its foundational activities. And in my somewhat kind of generous narrative of this, I do somewhat link this also to the presence of a particular group of students, who were keen to kick in doors and those kinds of things.

Dale: Okay and coming from that angle ... or from that experience you came from and in coming into contact with the various other individuals, activists, organisations or people from organisations that were involved in this, just give us a sense of how you experienced the formation of the APF, the actual formation - not necessarily it's politics but the process itself?

Ahmed: I think initially the process was very much practically orientated around a particular set of issues that were related to the issue of Igoli on the one hand and to the issue of Wits. I am talking very early on now, in the kind of first activist forums and also a kind of specific target of mobilisation which was that Urban Futures Conference. And so a lot of initial meetings and I think we had kind of a Supper Club thing about it, those kind of things were very much focused on making this particular mobilisation a success. And I think when it actually happened, when we took over the stage and when there were certain kinds of expressions of collective power, I think it gave people a certain kind of confidence in whatever this formation was and the desire to perpetuate it in some way as well as focus it. But also remember that in its very constituent parts it brought together at the time, the unions, students, the communist party, a range of activists within Johannesburg. So in terms of what it was, it was in itself novel, something that people were quite excited about and I mean from the kind of people making plans on white boards in a kind of small Trotskyite circles and those people within that kind of union movement, like John Appolis and that lot who even coming from those similar kinds of politics also had an experience of mass politics or wanting to build a broad front of what was the watchword there - a kind of neo-liberal privatisation which we...

Dale: Why don't you expand on that a bit? I am reminding you now - we do have the time to do it.

Ahmed: Alright, Well I think from around '96 when the issue of privatisation kind of enters both the political language of the ANC, well I mean it comes before but ... some kind of functional orientation to implementing certain privatisation programmes and at the same time as it's becoming kind of an increasingly important concept in the left, you know a kind of point of opposition, as something that represents a political wrong that we need to mobilise in order to ensure that it does not happen or if it does, to make sure that it cannot work in some sense. And I do think though that the kind of narrative of privatisation also has, and why neo liberalism, privatisation gets such symbolic importance is in terms of the lefts' object to be fought against, also needs to be read in terms of kind of the broader transformations within the communist movement, internationally. So, neo-liberalism it's one of those strange concepts that both includes capitalism itself and is a kind of particularly more devastating aspect of capitalism, and I think it partly gained some of its currency in relation to the attempt of the real left, to kind of regroup after a kind of outright critique of capitalism, not outright critique, but at least in terms of the kind of failures of the Soviet block and the kind of difficulties that presented for the communist movement internationally in terms of how they made their public arguments. Now, I mean we can go back historically and see if I'm right about this, but I do think in South Africa there was quite an uneven understanding about what we mean about neo-liberalism, or what was actually meant by privatisation and so forth. I actually think that our actual learning about neo-liberalism, our actual giving flesh to those concepts of neo liberalism and privatisation actually took place in a mode in which we

confronted these things at different levels and understood how they ... I think we only really understood what privatisation meant, or what gave it, it's particular political meaning in the ways in which we were forced to confront it in various struggles that arose.

Dale: Okay are you making, when you say these terms, are you making that application to the general left, or to your specific experience?

Ahmed: I am making to my specific experience as a kind of reflection on the left I was part of, you know what I mean.

Dale: So the one question I did have in that context is how did you at that particular point and time understand privatisation given these numerous, sort of approaches and understandings of the word itself or the reality of it?

Ahmed: I think it was to deepen, as I said, my kind of understanding of what neo-liberalism meant, what privatisation meant tended to deepen over the years in which these were active kind of points of our mobilising against. I certainly saw it as in terms of neo-liberalism as a kind of the dominance of a kind of market logic over all areas of life, but I mean in a kind of simplistic, rhetorical sense. In terms of privatisation, there was, still at least at that point, it's difficult for me to remember what my understanding of something was then, but it still existed on a kind of spectrum in which on the one side was privatisation, on the other side was nationalism and on the one side was rampant capitalism and on the other side was kind of certain forms of collective ownership in which nationalisation was one aspect ... even in that level the kind of depth of my understanding of what other forms of collective ownership were possible, those kinds of things and not really kind of ...

Dale: Gelled.

Ahmed: I mean not gelled, I had a sense of them, I was really a sharp guy ... I mean it's difficult what I mean you know my political experience has not been of the welfare state in the same sense and I think also the kind of ways in which the question of privatisation kind came to us, in its kind of critical form, because a lot of it was coming from North America or Europe, it was a specific experience of the kind of withering away of the nation state, not of the nation state, but in the context where that kind of meant the welfare state. Whereas in South Africa we were somewhat on a different, I mean although there was state involvement in the economy the kinds of social services and so forth, it didn't have the same kind of connotation and the same size ... it wasn't within the kind of qualified citizenship of the welfare state as enjoyed in Europe. So you know I think it was also understanding how the form of transformation was privatisation, of South African society, post-apartheid or at least had a kind of privatising logic to it and a kind of market centric principle of development. And I mean that was something that deepened and you were able to connect it to problems around every day, only in relation to those kinds of struggles around cost recovery and when you see their impact and the ways in which people are resisting them ... I think for the APF generally I think it's notion of privatisation, it's notion of neo-liberalism that becomes the kind of object of its critique of the transition takes hold out of a kind of pedagogy of a set of struggles.

Dale: So these struggles that were happening, in this case in Johannesburg, mostly on a range of different fronts?

Ahmed: And I mean initially, for me and the kind and formative thing, was the issue around Wits where I was based and it was precisely in the experience of them participating in the APF. I mean, like Prishani's understanding of Igoli deepened as a result of some of her work at Khanya, whereas for me it was very specifically in relation to the possibility of making those connections with SAMWU, with the Anti- Igoli Forum, within the process of the APF that there was a kind of deepening of what the neo liberal restructuring of the city actually meant, outside some kind of rhetoric that I picked up in one of Patrick Bond's articles.

Dale: So, when the APF was formed ... I mean the way you are coming at this is very useful, which is not so much in the empirical sense of the term but the conceptual as well as the sinews that built this kind of movement together. So when it came together, initially this activist forum just describe from that point, in your experiences in that early formation, how the APF and given the context of cost recovery from communities, given what was happening at Wits, the Municipality, all these things coming together, how that formed the identity and structure of the APF, once this had come together?

Ahmed: Well I suppose the kind of stuff around the Urban Futures and so forth?

Dale: No, no, I am saying that to me those kinds of activities and people were part of that building. I don't set the formation of the APF in July 2000, when it was formally announced, I set the formation of the APF around a bunch of things that came together, I am talking about that period.

Ahmed: Okay, I mean it's not an easy story to tell, precisely because it ... okay, so like for instance, even in the Urban Futures kind of mobilisations, the kind of SAMWU guy's were not really present, you know what I mean and it was a lot of people who kind of remained , although there are exceptions here, but a lot of the people who were kind of active in those kinds of mobilisations are those that landed up in the APF even a year later ... I mean the kind of SAMWU support was certainly there ... the Joburg left likes meetings you know, I mean there sometimes you had more people at the kind of activist forum than you would have at a particular kind of protest, but let's leave that aside. I think certainly, certain people were looking at, like I mean there were different ways of looking at what this thing actually was that was coming into being, you know depending on where you were standing. So I think afterwards, I mean it took us a while, for us to even realise that certain kinds of groups were no longer part of the APF, because I mean like the Johannesburg region of COSATU, I think it was quite clear early on because you know John who was an organisational man and understands he came, he reported that the Joburg region pulled out but you know, like SAMWU, he wasn't always too clear. With SASCO also, I mean that was the other thing, SASCO, you know I was part of SASCO, I mean we were using that branch to fight this thing, against maybe what the branch or some people in the branch would have wanted, I mean it was a difficult time for the branch so we called meetings but we were likely to be the people who were hegemonic in the meeting, So I am sure you know exactly what I am talking about organisationally. So we were able to do quite a bit but also as the APF kind of ... as the APF started gaining momentum, but

interestingly SASCO started to wane, it was also the end of my kind of student career mostly, you know what I mean, so the kind of struggle around the retrenched workers was winding down as a particular defeat and sometimes a kind of ficklety of activists. So I mean this is where my energy, attention was now being directed. But at the same time, I mean for a lot of other people, it represented a particular kind of threat particularly within the kind of alliance structures who saw this as precisely what it was in part, was a kind of ultra-left, critical of the ANC, groups coming together, which they necessarily, I mean at least from certain sections of the alliance, wanted to ensure that it doesn't gain any popular kind of credibility. It was in that context also that I suspect your experience within the SACP is partly related to that, is that kind of ways in which you know, that these people who were increasingly seen as a problem, needed to be, we need to get some distance from them. And I think that is what played out in relation to some of the early kind of organisations that were part of the formation of the APF ... I mean at some point even I read this weird thing where someone from the alliance was claiming that they formed the APF . It is not exactly untrue, but it is not exactly true, but I mean at the same time, you know what I mean, the very practical kind of context was then kind of distancing themselves from this in the hope that would disable it, or that's my kind of sense of what it was or part of what was going on there. But generally I think this was also something about the APF and it's what people looked to it from those in the alliance, was because it was not part of the traditional structures of the alliance, it meant that we had a little bit more freedom, in how we could critique the ANC. So for instance there are certain things I can say, as part of a collective forum like the APF that I cannot say as a disciplined member of the South African Students congress and I think that that's also partly what they were afraid of ...

Dale: You've mentioned this before and I think I am just going to follow this for just a second; this issue of voice and the public voice ... just follow that a little bit in relation to ... the character of that early APF and finding that voice?

Ahmed: Look I mean one of the things that I've learnt over the years, and it's a kind of lesson in undemocratic behaviour. Sometimes the person who does the work is the one who decides on the slogan; this is because, I mean often you can come back to the meeting and certain things will be discussed and thrown out and sometimes you have more democratic ways of deciding on certain things but I do think within relation to the APF, because of its size and so forth, the same rule holds for whoever kind of get's to the camera first, you know what I mean, or who is willing to stand there, is able to give a kind of public representation of the organisation and I don't think this was ever a problem for the APF, particularly in the early period. Because precisely what the kind of virtue at the time of the APF was, was to open into the public realm a whole lot of voices, that for all ostensible purposes were being suppressed in the kind of political world of the alliance which was the kind of political world of the left, at least until the emergence of the new social movements if you don't count the Keep Left's and the kind of newspaper selling left. Although Ashwin and them from about the '96, they managed to play a role again but I mean that's Durban again, which is another universe. But I think within the APF its public voice was at least the product of a number of different people who at the time were willing to do certain kinds of work. So you know, Lucien's kind of hegemony within the early APF Monitors, was a product of

the fact that Lucien was doing the writings for these APF Monitors and some of the kind of posters and so forth that we kind of developed, we never needed any kind of vetting of the slogans that went on them and whatever the case might be. And I mean these kinds of things they changed along the way and I think also ... this is also another thing ... the public voice of the APF was not just a product of the people who are members who were active in the APF, or actively involved therein. So for instance, what the APF, and I mean you need to confront these things, it is important in understanding the kind of political realm as well; so you had certain kinds of people like Patrick Bond, Ben Cashdan so forth who were very able to kind of put certain ideas out into the public realm and who were connected to international networks and so forth; their representations at times of the APF helped kind of shape what was seen as it's public voice, as well as how certain parts of the media, partly as a result of what is called broader civil society, mediates that public representation of the APF. And in that process partly also I think Trevor, within the APF itself, was someone who was looked at as a kind of important leader and so forth, but I think externally was far more promoted as the public face of the APF. Because remember until 2002 when John went up and spoke on the truck in WSSD, I mean he was a far less recognisable figure as the public face of the APF than Trevor Ngwane, in spite of the fact that he was the Chairperson of the organisation whereas I think Trevor in 2002 was already the ...

Dale: Was the organiser...

Ahmed: Ja, in 2002 he would already have been the organiser. So I think that's, that's partly how the question of the public voice of the APF at least in its initial phase was shaped.

Dale: Okay and the flip side, I mean not the flip side, but the other components of that - speak a little bit to when that came together, when they started to come together with those that were coming from the townships, from the settlements, from the other side that eventually made up the APF; their experiences, their perspectives, their engagements with all of these things, how did that mesh?

Ahmed: Sure, again it's not a very simple question ... but anyway I don't have a good answer for this one right, because I don't think that it's ever been an issue that has been properly resolved. Let's just go back a bit and talk about the kind of emergence with the kind of community within the APF. Certainly one of the first ones, the Soweto Electricity Crises Committee right; the formation of the SECC is an interesting one, because the SECC doesn't necessarily you know kind of, I mean ... if you're looking for a simple kind of romantic idea of the spontaneous emerging of a community organisation, you are not necessarily going to find it in relation to the SECC. The SECC from my understanding and I could be wrong here, partly grows out of a research process actually, in which the Public Citizen lot you know Mai and them do a project with the AIDC and Trevor and them on electricity particularly as part of this whole issue and again this is why I am saying that the whole issue of privatisation comes to us partly out of that global watchword, you know what I mean and then we, in our own actual experience of struggle that develops and deepens and it's given its own particular inflection in our political context; unless you see it in this particular context because of the kind of external organisation part of a city based NGO doing research in a particular area where one of the activists lives, right ? And here is where the particular romantic does come in; is that they discover ... Trevor tells a story of how they were asking how many

people are illegally reconnected and slowly you see half the room's hands going up, or the majority of the rooms hands going up and you recognise in the kind of face of these neo-liberal driven cost recovery there is resistance. And it is really the kind of ways in which this resistance, these forms of illegal reconnection that had grown somewhat spontaneously and organically out of this kind of community - in fact they had a much longer history since after all you kind of have to relate it back to kind of practices that go back to the apartheid era - the ways in which these particular acts are able to be given to a political narrative that can be taken into the public realm, right. And that's partly part of how the imagination of the SECC emerges with that kind of imagination of, around these ideas of KHANYISA, they turn us off, we reconnect you, and the kind of militancy of that kind of slogan whose trick is to take, or is to give political or to politicise these acts that are taking place in these different households and to give organisational form to forms of solidarity among these different households. And I think you know that kind of experience was something of a pedagogy for us urban activists in terms of what the effects of cost recovery were and exactly what the strategies of resistance in fighting them were to be. But nevertheless I mean I still think there was always something of a disjuncture between the forms of public representation of the organisation and even of those acts. So for instance, I mean Mamkwash is a very recognisable figure in terms of the public face of the APF in so far as Mamkwash's picture has made it more often and this is probably true even like this is not just a generalisation, it's probably true when you go and check the pictures of the APF, of the SECC at least, that made it into the newspaper, I mean Mamkwash always ... is the face of ... there was a beautiful picture of Mamkwash staring around and kind of promising them that we were going to be at the WSSD; and yet I don't think Mamkwash has been able to define the public voice of the APF to the same degree as the kind of urban militants who do the writing, who do the websites, who are first when the cameras are there. That's also partly to do with the way the media structures certain things, you know the media looks for kind of certain statements that can be read in civil society one way or another, which often has excluded community voices, but by own kind of technologies of media, we've also done the same thing. But it's part of an ongoing process, but I think that the APF has been one of those few organisations that have actually grappled with some of these questions and tried to address them, not successfully yet but nevertheless, I think partly also the kind of leadership of people ... the kind of leadership layers within the APF prioritised a particular kind at least in principle an idea of speaking for oneself and that hasn't always happened and issues of representation I suppose still stand thick in the APF.

Dale: From that early period, I mean you've gone beyond that early period obviously, in terms of just defining some of the subsequent character of the APF, but do you think that as the APF grew, as the APF sort of carried on its struggles and activities, did that fundamentally shift in any way or has that remained in various forms a defining feature?

Ahmed: No I mean things have definitely shifted and I don't think the APF has ever been wanting. I think initially you know, if you read the how we saw the APF in the remembering movements, we saw it certainly as trying, an attempt at bringing accountability through shop floor struggles or you know, struggles in the community but if you ask me for an account of what the APF was about you know, in 2007 I wouldn't have said anything close to that, I mean if you asked me what it's about now, I'd say

something quite different and something I can't really speak to, because I am less active. I mean it has never been a stagnant organisation and in fact if you look at the kind of initial orientation from the first kind of mobilisations, it's really much focused on a kind of specific institutional processes, as the kind of axis shifts around cost recovery, the axis around cost recovery is what is orientating the character of the organisation and is far more dramatically shaped by those particular issues. And I think at the moment, I think we are in a little bit of a difficult kind of period, this is another issue in relation to the kind of political character of the APF; I do think that the APF has in large part, has in large part been shaped by its antagonistic kind of language towards the ANC and I think this is in large part both the kind of contextual set of, or comes about around a set of contextual events and forces as well as a certain kind of political inclination ... or as some of the people that kept the organisation going in that period immediately after, as it makes the transition from the activist forum directed at the Urban Futures towards a kind of broader organisation. And so for instance you have a situation in which the APF is being vilified in a particular way ... by the kind of ANC and alliance forces, and so you take a kind of somewhat polar position in relation to that political set of formations. And at another kind of level, very much we were caught up in a narrative where we were the guardians of the true - it is one of the tricks in South African politics, where you become, in order to make a political claim, it needs to be on the basis that you are guardians of the authentic aspirations of the liberation movement - that what we represented is what these people have sold out. And I think in relation to our character at least for a while is very much determined by that polarity, or that kind of relationship to the ANC, whereas I think that's changing for a whole number of reasons, partly also to do with our own kind of successes. And also I think we won certain things that have translated into the character of what the ANC is today and what kind of contestations are happening on that side. All I am saying is that the simple answer to the question is that ... the APF has not remained the same and its particular shape, form and character, has been determined in relation to both a long term kind of development of certain organisational procedures and processes as well as a very specific political context and sets of struggles.

Dale: Right, the other element which we haven't mentioned yet and haven't crossed in that early formation and development of character is what was going on in other places, other movements that had been formed at the same time? To what extent do you think that had any kind of ... or was the APF purely one component of a process that was happening all at the same time and then somehow those things were linked?

Ahmed: No, I mean from my side they were definitely linked and I remember some of us kind of gathering at some person's flat who was working in SANCO to watch a video of Ashwin and the stuff going on in Durban, I think that happened in '99, whereas the APF stuff was kind of from 2000. So, I mean there was definitely a sense and again Ben Cashdan plays a kind of important role in developing the public image of that particular ... you know, through that.

Dale: Two Trevor's?

Ahmed: No, no before the Two Trevor's - he did a thing on Chatsworth one, and then the Supper Club, kind of screening at the Supper Club; the Supper Club was also somewhat of an interesting part in the

story, this is a little bit of a foot note, but I mean a lot of the initial kind of meetings and even a couple of fundraising events and so forth took place at the Supper Club ...

Dale: You were just saying that they're linked, in your estimation they're definitely linked?

Ahmed: Ja, they're definitely linked in somewhat complicated and not always smooth ways. So at the same time I think you know it's also part, part of a kind of growing discourse that is anti ANC, or not just anti ANC but specifically a kind of language and politics that starts to emerge in opposition to what GEAR is seen to represent for South Africa ... because there were a whole lot of other policies that are also quite important you know what I mean and that often don't get mentioned, that are part of a particular trajectory that GEAR came to be seen as embodying. And certainly I mean that's a kind of common thread which we saw at least from Ashwin's language in Durban to Johannesburg, it's this kind of ... in 1996 his departure from the kind of historical aspirations of liberation movement that however ambivalent were represented by the RDP and that is overtaken by the trajectory of GEAR, you know and it is the kind of common language that is already setting in within both mass formations of the alliance as well as the kind of small political organisations further to its left. And it is precisely - I think what was important here in the kind of same way the SECC struggles or those initial struggles from communities were pedagogy for us - I think in other cities like Cape Town and Durban they had a similar function for the left milieu in that city and kind of orientated them to specific kinds of struggles ...

Dale: Okay so in many ways you were reinforcing each other, you just reminded me of ...

Ahmed: Although, although I mean I will say that the APF went down to Durban. There was a lot of suspicion, there wasn't the kind of relationship and even the kind of relationship that has always existed between the AEC and APF for instance has always been a somewhat kind of territorial one, you know kind of protecting of some kind of turfs; less so I think from the APF for its own set of reasons but nevertheless we definitely saw ourselves as part of the same kind of struggle and at the same time in competition around the kind of same spaces of representation of that struggle.

Dale: To what extent do you think that the APF as the sort of embodiment of the various forms of the extra-Alliance Joburg left it as it came together, that it's character and it's understanding of GEAR, its approach and structure as it began to grow, it was born out of and was kind of different from these other forms because of what you mentioned earlier which was the vast majority of the people who came together in the APF, came in one way or the other, outside of the alliance structures?

Ahmed: Sorry.

Dale: Sorry, that's a long question. Let me put it very simply. You just talked about the differences on territorial and other aspects. To what degree can one understand the rise of an organisation like the APF and its differences with others to the extent of ... where its core constituencies and activists come from in their own experiences? You mentioned earlier how that was so important in the formation of the APF on making that application on a broader level.

Ahmed: I don't really know that. I mean I can't really speak because it means I'm speaking about formations; I mean I've got some sense of how they came about and so forth.

Dale: I have specifically been asking you about the extent to which you think that's the case - of why the APF developed in the way that it did irrespective of how other organisations developed and what they came to, but that's its character was partially, fundamentally defined by the very thing that you mentioned which was not just the experience of struggle, but the experience of political location so to speak?

Ahmed: Ja, no of course.

Dale: On every front? Like the community organisations as well or not because I am talking about the different components of the APF?

Ahmed: Sorry maybe I am just goofed, I am not getting very much of what you are asking me.

Dale: Okay I am just asking to the extent to which the subsequent development and the character of the APF was fundamentally shaped by, continually shaped not just in its initial formation together, but continually shaped by that, call it a legacy, of the alliance itself in Johannesburg.

Ahmed: Ja But I mean as I said earlier, I don't think that it's simply a question of a lack of kind of persistence of memory, I think it is a little bit more complicated; so for instance, the particular kind of thing that Prishani mentioned, you know the kind of march that you go on whenever there's a protest, then there's the June the 16th kind of things. The fact that these kinds of expulsions from COSATU and so forth, the kind of experience of the alliance and the silencing of the alliance never ended when we joined the APF and we were no longer in the Alliance. It was an ongoing kind of contest over the representation on a broader level of the voice of the left in South Africa and I think within that context we unfortunately ... not unfortunately, I mean to some extent these things are true, but at another level we've also very much been responsive to nationalist discourse, to a degree that has been I think a limitation in our development. So for instance I can point to an APF press statement, the betrayal in Cape Town that is accompanied by the official protest of the Freedom Charter celebration, I mean the very thing that we are re-claiming is the Freedom Charter. So I think that it's within a set of struggles and it's within a set of debates and so forth that this influence is felt and it's felt in ways that both reinforce in certain kinds of practices as well as in engender oppositional practices.

Dale: And when you say reinforced particular kinds of practices ... in other words the marches were reifying what was already there and what you brought with you?

Ahmed: Yeah. And I mean in like simple things. The very fact that every time we have, I mean how many Crises Committees have we formed? The term 'crises committee' itself is something that has a kind of historical place of a particular form of organising very specifically as South African in the Congress movement, Community Crises Committees specifically. Those kind of practices, certainly you know kind of grow out of that milieu of the Congress tradition and I do think we've reinforced certain ones,

developed them and so forth; and there are also other practices that developed in terms of our antagonism to what we see as who this particular force is.

Dale: Would it be fair to say, to characterise that using your own words or in an interview, as an inside-outside conundrum of some sorts?

Ahmed: At a much different level of abstraction, the inside outside thing, I mean, more specifically I was talking there about the actual orientation to certain kinds of conferences and so forth. But I think at a different level of abstraction certainly insofar as the very kind of argument that says we need to be in the Alliance to win certain arguments there to shape that kind of politics, is the same kind of argument that says we should be in the World Summit or Sustainable Development or civil society. To be honest I associate it with a particular political tradition.

Dale: Okay.

Ahmed: Does that make sense?

Dale: Yeah, it makes sense to me; I mean, I'm the interviewer so I am not going to get into a debate.

Ahmed: We can have a conversation about this.

Dale: No, no it's not that. I'm trying to find ways in which to extend, to allow you to expand on that and relate specifically to some of these things that we are trying to find out about the APF and the one way here I think is; taking all these aspects that you said in terms of the formation at different points from which that comes from, how did that then make for real politics in the early APF in terms of its own structuring, the way in which ... all those people that came, how did it structure itself in relation to what you just said?

Ahmed: I think already there were kind of certain broad organising practices that were deployed because the people who were doing the organising, this is what they knew. At another level, I mean I think the kind of shape and form of the APF though is far more specifically related to the kinds of – particularly its organisational form – is related, is responding to the kind of contingent phases to its development. So the activist forum made sense within the kind of particular period in which the predominant organisational form was these meetings in which urban based activists came together in planning and coordinating campaign around one or other issue. I think as it became, as you had more and more communities affiliating to the organisation and as well as when the issue of resources, whatever little resources are coming into the organisation when there's a necessity for at least administering a certain resource base in common which wasn't the case when we were in the activist forum, certain kind of new organisational challenges just present themselves. And especially I think where now the space of the APF is itself becoming more contested - in order to ensure a certain kind of fairness in any political organisation, things seem to kind of get more pushed in terms of, in the direction of representative forms; so a number of affiliates that will come to a meeting or whatever and those were both mediated by issues of pure democracy and resources in the eventual APF because the

number of people who come is also a fiscal decision , it's fucked up, but nonetheless. So certainly I think the kind of organisational was not just a forum as such but a forum of organisations that are affiliating to transform its organisational structure. And I think it's done that, I think the organisational structure of the APF has changed a number of times from initially being - at a number of levels - so the sub committees were under constant kind of restructuring depending on, especially when they were the most popular, when they needed the most attention, I mean not attention but making sure they were representative and nobody was more privileged than another person participating or shaping a particular sub committee. I think I need to go back ... but I always remember like kind of change and how the coordinating committee works was related to a kind of particular kind of growth and generally some sort of contingent or fiscal issue that needed to be addressed.

Dale: And from early 2000 to let's say 2004, first four years of the APF, it grew quite dramatically in terms of its size and the number of affiliates and that 's where the growth took place, not on the side of the activists, in fact that sort of waned in a lot of ways or broke up a bit. In other words, speak to the struggles that gave rise to this in those years - how did that then fundamentally in some ways shape the subsequent character of the APF as opposed to its early formation where the activist forum and as you call them the urban based activists, intellectuals whatever, were dominant - you talk about the voice who does the work - that fundamentally started shifting over time?

Ahmed: I don't know if that's correct, I'm not sure if that issue of the voice and whether the kind of community axis was the dominant one or whether that kind of middle class layer [had] disproportionate kind of monopolisation over the public profile - at least at a discursive level, discursive I mean in terms of the arguments and so forth for/by the organisation - whether that's ever been resolved. I mean it's been a constant struggle and we've been better at it at certain points more than others. But nevertheless I do think the character of the organisation and what it was concerned about, what it was engaging with, certainly shifts in quite dramatic way. At the kind of initial phases of the organisation we did not have a kind of orientation ... to kind of secondary things like the Gatherings Act, to kind of more focused issues such as for instance how much water a family living in Soweto requires and also understanding how particular levels of consumption were set by municipalities and so forth. As these became the kind of practical objects of our struggle - this is precisely what I mean in terms of deepening of our kind of understanding of particular issues and as well as giving particular meaning in how we start to understand - whether it be privatisation, cost recovery whatever the case might be. But I think as those kinds of issues became what we were concerned about, many struggles coming to the organisation and begin to reflect its character onto the organisation, yes it's a tremendous kind of shift. But it's one again, one that's ongoing and so the organisation also is tremendously also affected by, for instance, struggles against prepaid belonged to a particular period. But I am just speaking to a logic of development, not a kind of particular moment, right. For instance when the kind of emphasis of the campaign around pre-paid water meters shifts from one tactic to another, the character of the organisation also is subtly affected by those shifts; so from 'destroy the meter' and the kind of overt acts of infrastructure sabotage under conditions where we are fighting lots of legal defence battles and so forth to one where we are challenging pre-paid meter in the Constitutional Court. And it also has

affected the political language in which we represent our struggles; so the kinds of ways in which certain things are represented in the context of the court case and how they're represented in terms of our defence of sabotage for instance are quite different. I think that that's the nice thing about doing something like this – it's precisely to understand that kind of fluidity, political identity, when an organisation is able to reflect the character of the struggles that are animating it ... and I think that it also goes to that point that it's really been the kind of rhythm of struggle that's defined the organisation within the context of all these different organisations coming and going rather than a specific set or a focused ideological orientation. I do think it has an ideological orientation but not a kind of doctoral emphasis.

Dale: Let's just speak very briefly to that, ideological orientation as you understand it.

Ahmed: Look I mean at the kind of broader level of abstraction, the kind of ideological orientation is certainly you know something what we call the left in the simple kind of position between left and right. Even going somewhere deeper then, even if there's not a kind of agreement on what it is that is a subject of our political affirmation there is nevertheless very clear that the APF moves from a critique and opposition to capitalist development. When I say development I just mean that capitalism is the form of societal development. So I think that the APF does move from that premise from that very kind of basic level and something of the kind of negation that binds us. But I think at another level there is as well and I think that this is quite an important affirmation of democracy; I think it's still contested as to what the character or what we understand by a democracy is, and I think that is part of what democracy is, is even a questioning of what democracy is. I think that there is at least a kind of, that is one of a kind of collective control. I think some people would then see that as socialism, but I think that's part of one of the problems in terms of the APF's socialist orientation is that I am not sure that we're all socialists of the same social whatever. I mean I don't know, I think the different groups do seem to have quite different ideas of what that term means.

Dale: So for you and your experience, the dominant side of the glue essentially and how then it was shaped or moulded over time was the struggles themselves?

Ahmed: Yeah.

Dale: And the character of those struggles is that correct?

Ahmed: Yeah. But not just the character of those struggles, but even just more broadly you know, by the kind of contingencies of the everyday life of a political organisation. Our development has been, like our political character is certainly shaped by those struggles in the main, not exclusively, but in the main. But also, and this was a point I was making earlier, by the way we relate to the kind of nationalist context and how we fit into the symbolic order of post apartheid South Africa; but in the main by the struggles that it was involved in.

Dale: Okay. I am just going to pick up something because I think it relates and follows from what you were saying. Victories that the APF has had ... obviously we are going to talk about growth and we are

going to talk about the fact that the APF continues to exist since there has to be some positive development that happens, and victories that happen ... and how that links to the development of the character of the APF. What I was going to ask ... is the degree to which that struggle and those struggles themselves and the responses that came to those struggles, the degree to which that was something that began over the development period of the APF, after its initial two or three years, began to shape and define the APF, or the extent to which that did?

Ahmed: I think most certainly. Look, one of the things that characterised every battle that we fought, I mean apart from some kind of early kind of negotiations we had with Eskom and so forth, is that the state has for the most part been unwilling to treat us as a kind of authentic political force that is worth negotiating with. So what has happened often is that those victories that we have won, whether in relation to cost recovery and electricity cut-offs in Soweto or whatever, has been negotiated with SANCO, you know both lending credibility to the kind of civic movement within the alliance and at the same time distancing themselves from us. Also, part of a kind of a naming that authorises force to be used against us in certain cases, calling us ultra-left or people with agendas ... and I think that certainly has been partly also been a blessing because I mean we have not been drawn into forums that then force us in to kind of water down our politics but at the same time I think it has also not given the organisation a kind of sense of clear victories that it's won in a lot of cases which are important for building confidence among a layer of militants.

Dale: Just expand on that, I think that's an important point.

Ahmed: Well I mean those things that we've won, for instance, the issue of privatisation; the very reality of the fact is that we've completely changed the game and these kind of struggles of movements have meant that there is a kind of political limit that's established as to how far they can push the programme of privatisation; there's also a limit to how far they can push the program of cost recovery whose practical kinds of outcomes have been lifelines, social grants and so forth. And I don't just count the APF in these struggles, I count the much broader thing that collects a kind of political opposition that runs from the social movements to service delivery protests to simple ever day acts of resistance in private and certainly presented a tremendously real political challenges to how far real political programmes can be pushed. But because these kind of things have never been negotiated or kind of won within the public realm ... like for instance the biggest day for us is still sadly 2002, but our victory in 2002, is not counted and I mean that is in our public history, I mean that is how we see it differently, but in terms of public history, our public height is the 31st August 2002 march. But our victory on the day of the march is not any kind of policy change ... its' the number of people we put out on the street, which you know I think also meant for us as an organisation, I mean the anti-globalisation movement faced the same problem because they couldn't claim clear victories in any way because that's a global movement in that sense, unless they closed the World Bank down or shut the WTO down or something of that sort - and at the same time, the very imaginary, the very ways in which they imagined their own kind of victories, their own kind of development was in the amount of people which they put out on the street. It is a sense of a movement whose health requires it to see itself as constantly expanding especially if it can't

point to this is what we are doing, this is what we are winning and so forth; it needs to constantly show its growing as a movement and when it as itself gets a sense that we are no longer growing it can potentially enter into a crises. Now I think that is partly the crises of the global movement itself, it certainly has had a nice long run, but after the anti-war protest, they couldn't stop a war, the biggest anti-war mobilisation the world has ever seen couldn't stop a war, you know what I mean. The kind of movement that couldn't also point to itself getting bigger anymore entered something of a real crisis and at the last World Social Forum, which I think attracted ten thousand people, which is an interesting kind of indication. And I think with these kinds of social movements as well there was a similar dynamic at play; we needed to see ourselves constantly growing in order to imagine our own political health and we couldn't see that and I think it did disrupt something in the confidence of the militants, especially when they couldn't look to kind of tangible victories and we can say we won this. But that doesn't mean that there weren't any political victories or real political changes that came about as a result of social movement work. Even if you look at them stopping electricity cut-offs for a while in Soweto, it happened. In the same way that political discourse in this current phase has shifted far more to the left than it was in the 1990's, and the very fact that the question of neo-liberalism can be debated in the public realm and a certain acknowledgement that Mbeki was pro-business, is stuff that we've created the conditions for - by making these public critiques, by transforming them from the kind of crazy voices from the dark corners of the left into real public political issues, are something of the victories of social movements. But at the same time power always responds to resistance in one way or another. At the same time you can read in our victory some of our worst defeats. Our very success at kind of forestalling certain cost recovery measures was one of the primary catalysts to kind of shift to pre-paid meters within certain forms of indigent management and we are also at the same time in a kind of double bind where there's a constant dialectic between certain victories and a new installations that then are directed precisely to negating our protests.

Dale: So in that sense at least as far as what I understand that you are saying is that the various responses themselves were inherently acknowledging the impact of struggles?

Ahmed: Definitely the response of the state, definitely, whether it came in the form of repression; I mean we were not invisible, whether we were the objects of their repression or we were the catalysts of policy reformulation, we affected the business of government or a combination of the two, rethinking certain things or introducing lifeline tariffs ...

Dale: And, sorry just the other side to that is that at the same time ...?

Ahmed: And also, partly at the same time they didn't renew the contract for instance of Suez; I mean those kinds of things are real. But not in the same way like you see in Europe, you sent me an article about the end of privatisation in Europe; I mean the end of privatisation in Europe is not simply these guy's saying 'oh we were wrong', but its ways in which we show why certain things are wrong. For instance we create the epistemological conditions for government to recognise that these things don't work, that they are not working anymore in this way or the costs, the political costs that they are forcing

on us are too great for us to continue along this path. From that broad level of abstraction yes, we've done a lot.

Dale: One of the critiques that is made of these new social movements and particularly after their initial years, as you've said, the heady years where there's a lot of public profile and excitement around that, is that most social movements including the APF failed to relate to a whole range of new struggles and communities that rose from 2005 onwards. First of all I want you to respond to that - because I think your answer might include some aspects of the APF, in those years, in particular those middle year's as opposed to the early years - to what extent first of all, is that true?; and what that meant - whether it did or did not relate to these struggles - what that meant for the character of the APF during those middle years? Does that make sense?

Ahmed: I think it's uneven. Initially and if you are taking specifically about service delivery protests, when those arose with these kind of actions that seemed to be spontaneous, I mean I don't believe that they are spontaneous, I mean you don't put two thousand people out on the street spontaneously, but what were called spontaneous protests seemingly emerged without any kind of direct relationship to any political formation. I think, you know in certain areas there wasn't a distinction between, I do I think the APF did try to orient to those struggles ... but I mean there was the orientation to these kinds of mobilisations but I do think that the APF had already kind of submerged in a particular set of struggles and a particular set of ways of doing things and the very nature of those kind of uprisings as well; I don't think there was a simple formula of every service delivery protest is the preface to the formation of a crisis committee which is one day going to be the affiliate of the APF and I think to treat them in that way would've been a gross mistake. I think what was important would've been, had certain things like the self defence fund kind of worked or some of the ideas around those kinds of practical ways to give solidarity to communities in struggle - I think if we had a better framework for doing so we might have been better able to respond to some of those struggles that we didn't actually get to, but it doesn't mean that we didn't get to any. But I think it is also an idea of whether, I'm not sure if there is a certain kind of entryism in relation to organisation, but I mean there can also be entryism in relation to certain kind of struggles and I think that it is perhaps a good thing that we did not go too far in that level and I think that go into areas then become the public face of these kinds of protests. What would have been good was if we had other ways of offering practical solidarity to these struggles like saying we support your struggle and this is how we are showing that we are doing it. In truth, I am not sure if it was in 2005 or in 2007 when Silumko and these guys were going out and doing some tremendous work along those lines and more importantly mobilising our communities that were organised within the APF to go out and barricade roads and so forth; that's much more practical than simply helping you lead your struggle, you know we will join you. Again I also think that this is a difficult phase just generally after 2005. Once certain things had ... you know earlier who had been asking Prishani about this issue of heterogeneity of the APF; in the early phases that wasn't such an issue and it in fact was a part of the strength of the organisation but later as certain forces increasingly attempted to solicit hegemony and raise one position as that of a hegemonic one, I think the kinds of differences within the organisation started to play themselves out and it's around that period I think a lot of the kind of tensions that played

themselves out over the coming years started to take root. I think that another important dynamic is precisely at the point at which, I think it might have, and I may be a little bit simplistic, but it might have been before then, there wasn't that much to fight over, but there around 2005, the APF is not simply the loony left, I mean we are a veritable political force, I mean even though we are quite small still our voice carries some amount of symbolic capital and it is then something that people want to control, want to direct, to ensure a correct line. I mean people may think that sounds a little bit simplistic, but I mean at that level that is when during that period is where the kind of leadership contests start to take divisive turns within the organisation, not that there weren't shitty things said to people before then, there weren't fights before then but it's around then that it starts to, the stakes are pushed up to a level where nobody is simply willing to leave the issue.

Dale: Okay and to the extent to which that period, that middle period was characterised in the APF, by a range of different internal ...

Ahmed: But also remember we are also a part of a national context. To that extent, I mean we are still doing okay, I mean we're alive, CCF is gone by 2005, AEC is in massive crisis where it is debateable what the content of its existence is; I mean it is a very difficult period politically for social movements, the LPM has all but disappeared except for Jo burg. So in that context ... at least the APF is still alive. But I think also the fact that certain real struggles ensure its reproduction for one or other reason that there are fights that have to be fought: the pre-paid stuff that has also an important point - struggle for organisation sustains and that is one of the points in organisations, is having to figure practically in its relation among its constituent parts. But at the same I think there's the other kind of divisive context of the leadership battles that are starting to unfold. I really thought in this context it made sense to, because it wasn't context, but I do think the kind of solicitation, the actual hegemony of the Socialist Group over the office basically meant that what the organisation was being directed by a particular group within the organisation. I don't want to also make it seem like it is just a kind of natural outcome, it was a political problem that meant that the organisation was held hostage to the organisational structure as it was then, Trevor and them had an enormous amount of power in terms of directing who came to meetings who didn't, what communities were serviced in terms of organising and so forth just by their complete control of the office at the time.

Dale: And to what extent do you think that - this was at a particular time also, from 2005 - that the APF had more financial resources then it ever had before ; how do you tie that in, how do you think that impacted?

Ahmed: It is also a kind of important dimension, because the one thing that I didn't say is that I think although the character of the organisation has in the main been shaped by the struggles and I think that I didn't really put emphasis on the main; one of the other kind of aspects that has shaped it has been in the kind of ways in which it has been both to officially structure itself vis-à-vis how it gets money and how its manages that money. And two, both in relation to the very contest over common resources that took place within the organisation. Maybe the other is not as potent in relation to the formal structure of the organisation but it is at least important in understanding the kinds of divisive character of some of

the relations that began to exist within the organisation. So in relation to the one, that is in relation to the ways in which funders fund things and so forth and how that actually structures organisation ... for example, you know the Education Sub Committee, when a lot of money was ... going to the Education Sub Committee because this is what the funders were willing to fund, which meant that you also had a very strong Education Sub Committee, but also directed towards certain kinds of things, not necessarily a kind of mobilising-centric form of organisational usage, but rather a pedagogy that ... although important, I don't know sometimes I got a sense you know, somehow things were ... some of the things that the Education Sub Committee did were very important for us for developing a perspective on certain questions, but some of them ... it pushed the organisation into that kind of realm of workshops and bred an institutional and political culture that was focused around those as the centre of the organisation. The street and the march was now in competition or more acutely in competition with the coordinating committees and the workshops as the life of the organisation and what it meant to be part of the organisation.

Dale: And to what extent..?

Ahmed: But funding also shapes an organisational kind of ... especially like with our funder, there was some sort of demands of how that money needs to structure the organisation or needs to be administered within the organisation which then impacts on organisational structure. Now I think in broad terms, these have not been ones that have kind of been systems that have gone in the direction of reducing accountability, but rather they served to ensure accountability. But at the same time, they professionalise certain functions in the organisation; there does become a tension between the kind of rigours of accounting practices and democratic management of common resources. Even though that issue has historically been mobilised somewhat disingenuously, but is nevertheless a tension in relation to this...

Dale: No, no not at all. I was going to ask you to link that to how, as the APF developed and faced a lot of these internal challenges and everything, the degree to which that shaped an impacted on, what I would refer to as the general political and organisational consciousness of the core constituency of the APF?

Ahmed: Eish it is a very difficult question, just because it's one that I feel a little bit uncomfortable speaking to given my own subject position and so forth, because it forces ... I mean one of the things, comrades using the APF as a kind of livelihood though, you know, something of that sort. It is difficult for me, because you know what I mean I'm not in the same kind of context, for me to get in the office is not a big deal. I don't want to say that kind of network for friendships and so forth has lost it's kind of political character but who is to say what is the character of a friendship if you can't be both political and some of my friends are my comrades, and that's what I mean by comrade. So it is difficult one there, but I do think that there is, there was a very real sense in which the centre of the organisation became the office, I mean it's partly also set in with the education sub committees, workshop kind of programmes and research sub committee and those kinds of meetings and so forth. So what it meant is that peoples' participation in the organisation and the life of the organisation became almost city centric, and in order to participate, you had to come to the city and that meant mediating who can

participate in the organisation based on resources, so that was one issue. But another issue was that it was kind of ... like the bail monies, you know bail monies were always a problem, you know like when comrades go and collect their money and they don't give it back and there was that kind of element where there was a sense in which kind of collective resources could be taken by certain comrades; it almost became somewhat kind of normal, people claiming, over claiming transport money. I mean that was something of a kind of issue and I think it is one that's particularly also brought about, it's one of the challenges when there is collective resources, but also one where some people are seeing collective resources or rush to ensure your share of collective resources, which I think is also part of maybe what we all need to learn. You know for the middle class folk whose interest was in the voice, there was the rush to claim the voice of the APF, because that also maybe is what has been kind of particularly valorised, and then for some people there were a rush to claim the resources of the organisation. And in both instances there was a kind of need for learning to be in common, to be collectively. That is something we still have to learn, communism, one of the good things about this new movement is that we recognise that we had to learn to become communists in how we're fighting for communism.

Dale: And how did that play itself out from your experience from those years? In other words how did the APF survive this multi-pronged assault on it from various forms and ways?

Ahmed: I didn't mean to put it like that.

Dale: No, no not at all, because I personally agree with you, but I am asking you how in your experience at the time, how you began to...?

Ahmed: To disappear?

Dale: Yeah, move away.

Ahmed: Ja, I mean look for me it was disappointing ... okay look, if I'm talking about me, I am not giving you some political narrative, yeah, I am talking from a personal perspective. I mean the APF and the kind of disappointments I felt about the APF which was simply a function, like for instance, one is most heart broken by a cheating girlfriend when you imagine it is a virtue in the first place, so my own disappointments in the APF, were ... it was a function of my own investment in the APF. It came in a particular period in my life, where like I said was making a kind of transition from a kind of student activist to an adult activist and yeah it was also something that I invested a lot of hope in. So the shattering of my naivety about the fidelity of that which I loved or lack of fidelity of that which I loved, it fucked me up. But I mean it's not even that, that is not even my reason, my own kind of reasons for thinking are both kind of somewhat more political and somewhat more selfish ... and I think there are a lot of people that might say the same. But at the same time, it's not just a kind of assault on the resources of the APF that I was disappointed by, I am disappointed also by the kind of assault on the common, whether it be in relation to the kind of voice of the organisation or the kind of collective resources of the organisation.

Dale: In explaining that, which I think that most activists which would have been in the APF for a number of years would probably concur with at different levels in terms of those kinds of experiences and perspectives - do you put that mostly down to, or is it a combination or one or the other predominantly, the internal character of what the APF became in its own internal contradictions or what was going on - because we started, the story of the APF starts in some ways in the macro context and then goes...?

Ahmed: No I think it's definitely related to the macro context, but poverty is not the only narrative or kind of struggle over hegemony, I think those are certainly part of it. But I also think for instance, because there's a kind of almost total exclusion of people from the kind of political realm, people living in poverty, sometimes what kind of develops is what someone like this guy called Chattargee calls the 'politics of government', that is where you anticipate government responses to certain kinds of things or you try and work the governmental machine. So like governments' response to squatters in a certain way, so maybe it might be more beneficial to be a squatter than to be a back yard dweller and so forth. And I do think some of that kind of way of relating to the governmental machine, also is part of how people relate to the kind of, I, include within the governmental machine the NGOs and so forth, and is a particular way of accessing certain kinds of resources where the voice and a little bit of funding and so forth, but sometimes means being a particular kind of subject or making yourself into a particular kind of subject that is then the target of whatever that might be. And I think part of that has filtered into how we relate to popular movements and particularly with the APF, because the APF has kind of been seen as a sight of resources, there was that ... at the level of practice and so forth but I also think at another level ...politically okay, from at least about 2004 it's clear that the Mbeki kind of trajectory has shifted now and largely as a kind of response to the struggles of social movements and at the same time I am not sure we even still properly understood how we played that out because we were not in that same kind of political milieu, of the kind of restructuring of neo-liberal welfare ... I'm not sure of the indigent management strategies, lifelines all of those kinds of things, I mean they came about in a time that both attempted to kind of discipline people in particular ways, but also reintegrate them on conditional terms. And I am not sure where we stand in relation to that.

Dale: That's an interesting point actually. Tie that in, in some way to that 2005 period particularly when this became a very key debate within the APF and around which a lot happened - which was about the contestation and the political realm, the character of the contestation in the political realm ...?

Ahmed: I think, and certainly Oupas' paper about where to orientate, I mean it is not the importance of that paper it's particularly because he describes a particular strategic interregnum that social movements were going through around 2005 and still are not really out of it, so it is a long interregnum. Oupa's formulation though it kind of situates itself or its resonance is that it is situated in a particular period and a particular questioning within social movements, it sort of simplifies the issue between whether you orientate to organised labour or you orientate to service delivery protests, I mean it's too kind of oppositional, it's kind of simplistic formulation meant it cannot really describe what the real problem is. But I mean that same problem out of which this interregnum springs, we're not really sure now how we fit into this kind of period and what that means has also played itself out in the kind of

debates that went on in the APF around participation in elections and so forth, although those debates are not new. In fact those debates are older than the organisation because precisely some of the constituent members of the APF had already been engrossed in these debates of whether you actually form a mass workers party or what it means to form a mass workers party and what one would actually look like. At the same time I think within the APF, there was a need that we need to cash in some of this capital that we have amassed politically in the form of an electoral campaign as well as strong pockets of opposition to it, that also pre-date the actual organisation. And then I think there was also a third kind of dimension in relation to how much sense it would make outside of the APF itself - whether Ahmed Veriava has a kind of distaste for the political or whether Trevor Ngwane sees it as a necessary step in the kind of development of the left voice in the post apartheid South Africa. So in relation to whether it made sense for the organisation or not, I think that, that's, I mean those are questions that only I have my opinion of and I can't speak of other peoples' ... and I'm sure they will as you interview them ...

Dale: Okay we are back on after a quick pause.

Ahmed: So we were talking about the kind of election debates basically, right?

Dale: Yeah the contestation

Ahmed: I also think it was somewhat partly a response to a crisis particularly within the organisation when we saw that it was no longer growing, there were a kind of necessity for something else or something to reinvigorate it; and some people, those who didn't come with pre established ideological positions might have seen the elections as a possible way of reigniting the movement. And I also think the lack of imagination to some extent ... what the nature and character of post-apartheid politics is has already been circumscribed by an institutional framework that we are now standing outside of and in order for us to be real political players we need to enter the electoral terrain and it is ultimately on this terrain that we mature, that it was the kind natural evolution, the type that we were was the electoral kind of end. And I seriously kind of departed from those kind of perspectives in so far as ... the potential of the APF was to create and to kind of return to other forms of democratic contestation and to at the very least, I don't have a kind of general problem with elections but unless we have working democratic forms of our own making it makes no sense to enter into these highly institutionalised forms that can only then end in a certain kind of capture of us politically. This is precisely because, and I mean we saw this partly with the SECC experience, where a person literally walked away from them, their candidate. So they managed to deal with that as Trevor points out but nonetheless I think that experience has nevertheless shown that unless you want to put your faith in the loyalty of a cadre you need to do some movement building work to ground that beforehand and that movement building work is precisely the creation of alternative forms of democratic practice and co-existence that needed to be locally established, which is why I did say I would support an electoral campaign at the time if it was like linked to community assemblies and so forth and these could be sustained, you know made real kind of organs of popular expressions of collective power. But that takes years ... an assembly is not a campaign, mass meeting.

Dale: Yeah

Ahmed: So there were those kinds of things. But at another level, I mean I do think that we need to both understand what it is, how we want to be politically in this period and who we want to be. At the same time as we avoid our political capture by both the kind of symbolic content of contemporary nationalism as well as the institutional fabric of the post apartheid state. Does that make sense?

Dale: Mmm, it's a tricky road. Just a few last questions - you began to move out of the APF a couple of years ago, around 2007 -2008. But by that stage already there was already underway a huge contestation of another sort on another political terrain within the ANC and alliance, and shifts were beginning to take place there quite dramatically in a lot of ways, or so it seemed. Speak to the degree to which in that context that impacted on, or shaped in whatever way the kinds of questions that you were just speaking to regards to the APF struggling with and also that shaped it internally?

Ahmed: Well personally I was highly cynical about anything happening really in the ANC, I am still not sure what happened. I know there has been a change of the presidency and certainly a far more worrying invocation of nationalism from that quarter and when I say more worrying because it seems emptier and more contradictory than ever, not that it wasn't always empty and in contradiction. So at that level I mean I did not really effect, it did affect how I saw the APF, and I do think that it did affect the spaces that the APF could potentially occupy, particularly I think it is changing a bit again now, but I think particularly in that period in which Mbeki is *persona non grata* with certain sectors in the ANC, I do think that it gave us a little bit of breathing space in the public realm. And certainly people like Ashwin could be invited to COSATU gatherings and things of that nature and it certainly validated important aspects of what we had been saying since 2000; that it so far that the kind of campaign fought against Mbeki was extensively fought in political language that we had given public weight to, through our statements and struggles, you know certainly look with a lot more scepticism at anyone who said we were the loony left. I think at that level it certainly did affect the APF at some level, but it was also part of something that was already happening, like what I am saying it is not the kind of separation that ... the ANC thing happens because there is a broader social shift in people's perception of what the transition is and what was the political character of it and that we were part of helping shape; and it was precisely on that basis that a campaign can be launched against Mbeki of a particular character and as soon as that's done it just opens the space for more us ,at least within that period leading up, at the very least, to Mbeki's departure. At that level, I do think also it might have, I am just talking I am just listing things like I'm not putting them in any hierarchy. I think also another way also the APF was affected probably in terms of presenting new political questions to the APF is how do you orientate to this block which for all extents and purposes we are not distanced from and two; has at least a certain kind of attractiveness to a lot of people who are members of the APF. Even for me I mean there's something sweet about Zuma, I love him, but of course I am talking shit, you know. But you know what I am saying, there is something about Zuma that is almost endearing in a kind of clownish way and I think it was made, it precisely gets it's political content that people are gravitating towards Zuma, the very character of our kind of political language has been one whose identity was shaped in its opposition to the ANC

and at least presented some problems to how we were going to, as the Trots would say, have a conversation about Zuma, about these questions. So I think those would be the two main things that I saw as affecting us. Organisationally, I don't know, I can't say because I haven't been around at the height of it and the height of it probably was once I was somewhat outside of the organisation. There were also some meetings that I have attended since, but I didn't get the sense that it was having a kind of major impact on the questions and problems that the organisation was dealing with at a practical level. I think it was more of an issue around election debates, the most recent election debate, because there you face the practical question at which this is at stake, at least in part.

Dale: Okay and you mentioned when you sort of left your involvement and the activities within the APF, one question I didn't ask you which is that ...

Ahmed: I never really left the APF.

Dale: Ja, sorry that's the wrong word to use, you didn't leave the APF.

Ahmed: I just kind of drifted.

Dale: Drifted a bit, ja good word. But before that, just say a few things about your own involvement in the APF, what did you do, what were you involved in?

Ahmed: Alright, It's a question that when I was drifting I asked myself – what in the fuck do I do in the APF? Practically, I worked on the legal sub committee and I helped organise money for bail, legal defence and so forth. I helped put together marches in every kind of major mobilisation of the APF; I threw myself at that kind of work at various levels. A lot of it included media, a lot of it also was just kind of like silly things, like you know being the only person who would go and find the map of the march or the route we were going to take for the march, you know kind of see what the security establishment's particular form of organisation of repressive forces on that particular day was going to be likely to be and things like that. This is also the other thing, a lot of media work that I did, you know in the APF had to do with the fact that, you know me and Nicholas had a lot of fun when we did these things and the legal work was always a fucking chore. But a lot of what I did in the APF, I enjoyed; I attended a lot of meetings and I kind of served at a particular time as one of the people that are helping, ensuring that this thing stays together, that it's cohering, that its going somewhere, that its political direction has some sort of meaningful content. What was I doing in the APF? I mean I always enjoyed marches and...

Dale: The one thing that I wanted to ask you specifically which I just realised while we were talking that I had missed out on, although it wasn't that long ago actually, was your particular involvement with the APF and the anti-xenophobia campaign ... because that was a new, well not completely new, in a sense that there was not xenophobia before, but in a sense of being an integral part of what the APF was responding to or doing and you were involved in that, just speak a little bit to that.

Ahmed: Ja well ... if I remember correctly I came to the meeting and fell back into things, but I think it was also at the level of the kind of interventions that we made there again, was mainly with media,

trying to at least at the beginning trying to ensure a development of some sort of structure. To be honest with you I did not do that much in the anti xenophobia coalition, I mean I helped the march, the building of the march and I helped the media, you know those kind of things. But to be honest with you, If I am completely honest I fucked up Dale, but I'm glad to say ... I am less embarrassed by it because I think the failure was also not just mine. I mean a mass betrayal of migrants by the progressive left not just me. But it's part of a much longer kind of or much deeper set of problems; I think there is an inability of the kind of left to which we belong for responding to the issue of xenophobia more adequately. Because its political discourse over the last ten years has been effectively based on, or presupposes in its kind of discursive arguments in the political realm and so forth, have kind of moved from an authentic national subject who is a subject of betrayal by the ANC government and whose kind of legacy that its being robbed of as part of a kind of an injustice that stretches to the history of colonisation and apartheid - is in its dispossession and so forth is our reason for struggling. And it has meant that and it's based still and this again is how the kind of mythology of national oppression that ... the thing about nationalism, any form of nationalism is that it cannot - sorry I am rambling a bit here but it is an important point - is that it has imagined the nation from the beginning of time and existing as kind of authentic unity to which we properly belong and the kind of, this is what's presupposed in the national oppression thesis, but I mean the reality of capitalist development and the development of South Africa's economy and so forth, is far more common.

END OF APF_Ahmed Veriava 19022010a

START OF APF_Ahmed Veriava 19022010b

Dale: Ok, were' back after a fee technical problems, just on a new track. Ahmed just a last couple of very brief questions; the one is what you would identify in the entirety, I know it is a big question, but nevertheless, in relation to the key strengths and weaknesses that the APF has had and I'm not talking about going back to the beginning but where you left it at and how you understand it now?

Ahmed: Strangely it is not really a question that I have a good answer for, one would expect that I would have for an organisation that I devoted sometime to. I guess its strength and this is more of a kind of sound bite response, but one that has the advantage of being true, it's strength and its overriding strength is that it has always been rooted in a set of very practical struggles from its inception to the present, albeit struggles that have changed and shifted and so forth over the years. To that I think is also linked to an important weakness, is that I think there's been many struggles that we have undertaken that even where we've won things at a kind of a particular level of abstraction, stepping back to a particular point of abstraction we can see the things that we've won but I think one of the weaknesses of this organisation is that of the struggles we've experienced have at best been stalemates, at worst defeats. And to the extent that many of the struggles that were once were part of the APF are no longer, without that necessarily having meant that they were resolved in favour of the community. So from the kind of ... the kind of struggles that happened here in the city to you know what is going to happen to the pre paid stuff now I mean that's those things. And I think another strength of the APF, I mean

although it is quite a contentious issue and has always been double sided is what you were calling the heterogeneity of the APF. Because what it's done, is I think it's forced all its constituent members to at the very least engage in some sort of collective debate with others of a different kind of political persuasion around specific issues and in that way, at the very least, enforce a particular kind of intellectual modesty that means we not - using a phrase of Marx - anticipating the world dogmatically but rather you know, we have allowed our critiques to develop along the contingencies of the actual struggles that we have undertaken. I mean its primary weakness perhaps is its unresolved connection to nationalism and the ways in which as a political formation it still takes as its primary kind of life world, the nation state.

Dale: And just lastly, in the current context even though, as you said, you drifted away from the APF in terms of active participation on a regular basis, but nonetheless in the current with all these things and the APF still, it's ten years now, the APF is still there with all of its weaknesses as well as some victories and other things - give us some sense from all those experiences you've had as well as the present context, what do you think an organisation like the APF, whether it is history?

Ahmed: Ja well one of the things that interested me about this project was that I thought that the ability to tell the story of the APF from its end as opposed to so many narratives of the APF before the story was over - you never knew how it might conclude - I think you can finally tell the story of how the APF finally concludes. But hopefully that end is also a new beginning, the kinds of political formations and the kind of political practices and imagination it has forged, the kind of positive moments of the APF, is something that I do hope has a real future. I do think that the APF will probably exist in one form or another. But I think there's a particular APF that belongs to a particular period of South Africa's transition from apartheid and it is part of the history of that, those contestations, anxieties and tensions. I think the APF and I think this is not something - unless you come from a very old school Marxist perspective and believe that the only kind of political formation for the working class is the revolutionary party - then you have to see this as part of an ongoing part of development of struggle and these kinds of shifts. It's like I never saw the future of the APF as the future of the revolutionary party, you know what I mean, the passing of the APF is not necessarily a bad thing, so long that the energies that gave it its vigour and so forth can help re-establish a new political terrain, new political solidarities that makes sense to whatever struggles that are now going to present themselves. But like I said, the APF will exist in some kind of form or another but the kind of APF that was a product of that particular period is no more; what that means I am not really sure yet, but I think hopefully this project, that is one of the questions that it at least might present something of an answer to.

Dale: Okay, thanks very much.

Ahmed: Sure.