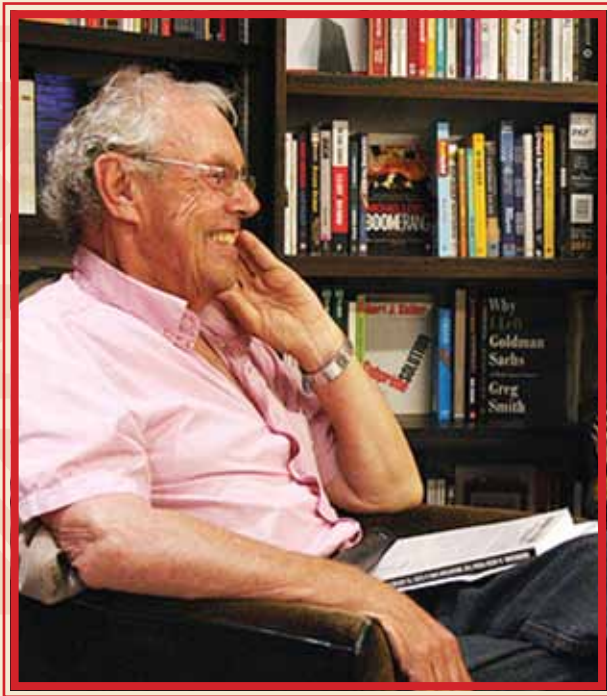





Martin Legassick

Messages of condolence,
remembrance, solidarity



Hamba Kahle revolutionary socialist scholar,
internationalist and fighter for the working class!



by Martin Legassick

*Speech given at World Association of Political Economy forum on 21 June 2015 upon being awarded a **Distinguished Achievement Award in Political Economy for the Twenty-First century***

Let me say, once again, I am honoured to receive this Distinguished Achievement Award for my book, *Towards Socialist Democracy*. At its launch at the Cape Town Book Fair in 2007 Patrick Bond asked why the book was so long! I replied, Patrick, you publish a book every year, but this is the product of 40 years activism, discussion and research!

Here obviously I can only advance a series of propositions from such a long book without substantiating them, though, eight years later, I have updated their emphasis in line with the concerns of this forum.

In the first place, capitalism is in crisis. It offers only prospects of increasing austerity, increasing inequality, and increasing unemployment — particularly for youth, who in despair turn to gang culture, drugs and crime and are in danger of becoming a destroyed generation. Together with that, with ecological disasters and global warming, capitalism has the potential for destroying life on this planet.

I am for democratic eco-socialism built from below.

The crisis affects every country, at this moment most acutely in Greece. All working people (I return to what this means) need to support the struggle of the Greek people because the course of events there will affect the ability of capitalism to impose greater austerity on the working classes of other countries.

At the same time, there is the frightening rise of xenophobia, religious fanaticism and terrorism — horrible dangers suffered mainly by



women who lose their breadwinners — created in futile reaction to imperialist oppression and division of the working class, together with the present weakness of left leadership.

A major theme of my book was a critique of Stalinism the ideology of “Communist” Parties such as the SACP. I maintain that the term Stalinism does not just describe a repressive system but a world view defending the interests of ruling bureaucracies against the working class — with international repercussions which have set back the struggle of the working class for generations. Stalinism is not a variant of Marxism, but alien to Marxism

Like all humans, Marxists make mistakes. Marx did; Lenin did. So did Trotsky. Their uncritical followers do too. But one tragic legacy of Stalinism has been to bury the legacy of Trotsky’s ideas. Stalin hated Trotsky and had him murdered, as well as tens of thousands of his followers. But Trotsky had many correct ideas which advanced the theory of Marxism. His analysis of the degeneration of the Russian revolution, his analysis of fascism and critique of Stalinist’s then ultra-left approach — drawing on Lenin’s critique in the Comintern in 1920-1 of this tendency — were among the ideas which led Perry Anderson (not a Trotskyist) to write “The historical scale of Trotsky’s accomplishment is still difficult to realise today.” Trotsky’s innovative use of the concept of bonapartism in its proletarian variant characterizes the phenomenon of a totalitarian bureaucracy presiding over a (degenerate) workers’ state such as the Soviet Union was, and a number of other countries, including China — mostly if not entirely now reversed.

Regarding South Africa, my argument drew on Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution — that national oppression would only be ended when capitalism is ended. It was a theory tested and proved in practice in the 1917 Russian revolution and proved negatively in the defeat of the revolution in China in the 1920s as a consequence of the rise of Stalinism.

The ANC claims, farcically, it is pursuing a ‘national democratic revolution’. But its policies are neo-liberal capitalist, serving the interests of mining and finance capital, entrenching South Africa as the most unequal society in the world, with horrendous poverty and

unemployment. I heard at this meeting that there are 400 new coal mines in operation or being opened up (with the encouragement of government – despite its supposed commitment to the environment) – all dependent on cheap black labour and on the oppression of women as social reproducers.

The ANC's policy of so-called black economic empowerment (the enrichment of a few blacks to join the white elite) cannot end racism or national oppression. The majority of blacks remain poor and tend to resent all whites as rich, while whites see poor blacks as threatening criminals. Racism and racial discrimination persists, and, with it, inter-racial violence (including a culture of internecine violence in the poor areas – in which women are subjugated). Only the replacement of the present state by a democratic workers' state can begin to end all this – but then it could be ended rapidly.

Along with its bankrupt policies the ANC has become degenerate. With Zuma, (or even earlier, in the arms deal) corruption started at the top and has spread throughout.

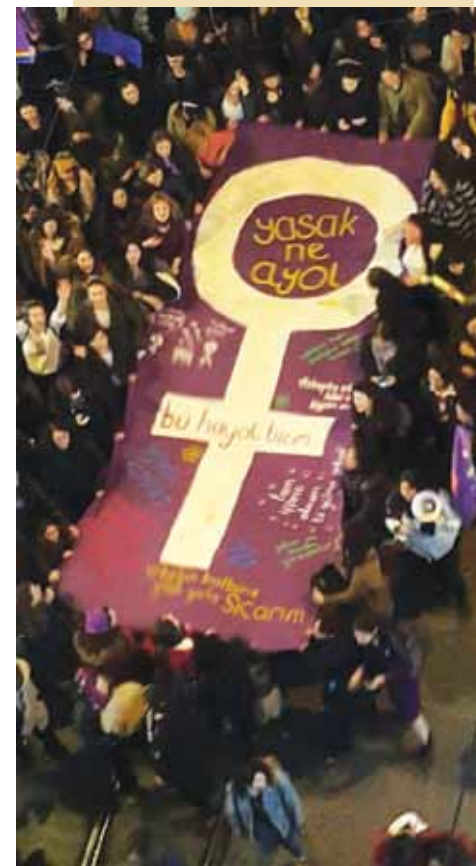
Leaders of the SACP engage in poodle-like defence of every scandal of the ANC: Nkandla, El-Bashir, the Guptas etc – while the party masquerades as left! At this forum comrade Jeremy Cronin in his keynote address claimed the SACP had abandoned the two-stage theory – and was for building socialism now (within, of course, the framework of the 'national democratic revolution'!) This while SACP leaders, including himself, sit in a government bankrupt in policy and reeking with scandal and corruption. Shame on all who remain in the SACP or under the influence of Stalinism!

In the same address Cronin spoke of "building socialism now" through advances in reindustrialization and advances of a non-commodified economy – by which he means the abolition of exchange-value (money) in favour of exchange of use values (for example, free public transport, free health, free education, free housing). Both aims are in my view futile if incremental and utopian to achieve against global capitalism. The real task for "building socialism now" is to build the forces capable of replacing the capitalist state with a democratic workers' state which could then, together with international working class struggle, start to build socialism.

There are hopeful signs in the breakaways from the ANC-led triple alliance: the Economic Freedom Fighters, NUMSA's United Front, AMCU replacing the NUM. They are signs – like the crises in the ANC Youth and Women's leagues – of the beginnings of the disintegration of the ANC. SACP leader Blade Nzimande denounces these new movements as imperialist-inspired. This is typical Stalinism: link the so-called 'ultra-left' with the right while the party is in the 'reasonable left.' Hopefully building these new movements and eventually perhaps through their unity in action, they can constitute effective means for the working class to challenge for power, though presently all have weaknesses.

Who is the agency for change? The working class. Who are the working class? In the first place, all those separated from ownership of the means of production. Those actually working for bosses have the power to strike, up to unlimited political general strikes. But the working class includes not only those working for a boss but all the unemployed, whether of working age (young or old), pensioners or children. In particular women, who engage in social reproduction without a wage (as papers at this meeting have highlighted) as well as being among the most exploited workers (on the farms, as domestics, sex-workers) – have a strong interest in preserving the means of social reproduction. They are empowering themselves. Those women or men not actually at work also have potential power, to protest, demonstrate, block roads, etc as recent movements here and around the world have shown. In the present period together with all the poor hard-working peasants, the majority of the peasantry around the globe, have nothing to separate their interests from those of the working class and can join in protest to protect their interests and to build unity in struggle.

Martin was committed to socialist feminist politics



So I am an eco-feminist-democratic-socialist. I am indebted to Jacklyn Cock, a co-Award winner, an old friend of nearly 50 years, from whom I have recently learnt much on feminist theory and practice (I was first converted to feminism by Roxanne Dunbar, in the United States, in the 1960s). For my eco-emphasis in addition to Jacky, I am indebted to Vishmas Satgar, also a co-Award winner, and to Brian Ashley.

The majority of the middle class also have interests in socialism – but need to take their lead from the working class. The threat or the reality of costly indebtedness to the banks destroys their independence. In reality, they are also oppressed. The social movements are critical of NGOs who try to control them. The real critique that should be made is not of the middle class as such, but of middle-class political party leaders who posture as representatives of the middle class when they are really acting in the interests of capitalism.



In his keynote address Cronin advocates advancing the struggle by delinking from global capitalism. This, in my view, can bring for any country only temporary and partial relief and again, if incremental is futile and if full is utopian. The Freedom Charter is in fact the starting program for the struggle for power. The immediate task of a democratic workers state is nationalization of the banks, multi-nationals, and big monopolies under democratic workers' control and management, and planning the economy democratically – moving rapidly to ensure that health, education, housing, transport, etc are free and open to all.

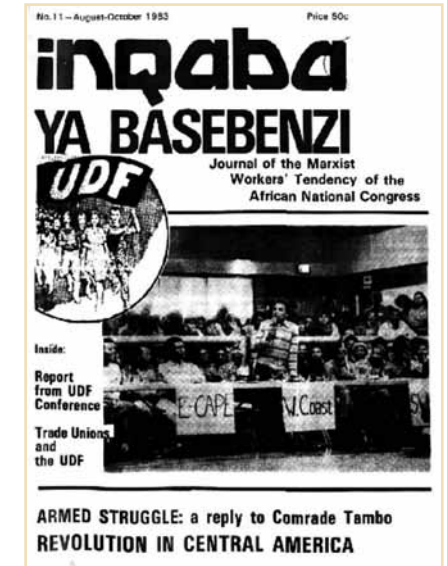
More than that, a fully non-commodified economy which Cronin advocates cannot be created in isolation – it requires the spread of workers' democracy from country to country. How quickly this needs to occur is uncertain before degeneration would set in. But one example, even more than in Russia in 1917, could today inspire working people around the globe who are all suffering from cuts in living standards in a painful race to the bottom, from gross inequality, and with the threat of the eco-destruction of humanity hanging over them.

But the working class can win! For forty years I have believed this and continue to do so.

Viva! Amandla!

Dave Hemson:

Martin Legassick should be remembered for his courageous spirit and his political contribution. He was unhesitatingly involved in the struggles of ordinary peoples. He had a steely commitment to combine his intellectual work with social engagement and the stamina to carry this through. Martin knew that this would absorb great reserves of time and energy, yet he gave everything he could to help create a genuinely democratic society to resolve South Africa's enduring inequalities. He believed his contributions in writing and involvement could inform and inspire this effort; the tributes to the man and his work show that they have.



Martin served on the editorial board of *Inqaba ya Basebenzi*.

Roger Silverman:

On behalf of the Workers' International Network and from the deepest personal feelings of my own, I send condolences to the family, friends and comrades of Martin Legassick.

I knew Martin from the mid-1970s onwards, when I had the privilege of working alongside him and his fellow members of the Marxist Workers' Tendency of the ANC and their exemplary journal *Inqaba ya Basebenzi*. They did truly heroic pioneering work in preparing the ground politically for the revolutionary earthquake that was to come two decades later. Martin's contribution then and always had a gigantic significance belied by his personal diffidence and modesty. His outstanding work *Towards Democratic Socialism* and his other writings leave a unique and lasting theoretical legacy.

And yet Martin was never a mere academic bystander. In the years before the downfall of the apartheid regime, he willingly sacrificed a promising career to pour his energies selflessly into the struggle to build a living base for revolutionary Marxism. For this he was expelled and vilified by the leaders of the ANC. Later, in defiance of their rule, at real personal risk

he participated in the struggles of tenants in the Western Cape facing eviction, the miners and survivors of the Marikana massacre, the farm workers of the CSAAWU, building the Democratic Left Front as a focus of working-class resistance. He was also a key contributor to the work of the Workers' International Network in reorienting Marxists to the tasks ahead.

Martin was an inspiring teacher, not only a brilliant Marxist theoretician, but an example to us all with his lifetime of integrity, honesty and courage.

As Martin said: "Capitalism is in crisis. It... has the potential for destroying life on this planet. Who is the agency for change? The working class. But the working class can win! For forty years I have believed this and continue to do so. Viva! Amandla!"

Colin Bundy:

I first heard Martin's name when I attended a NUSAS seminar at Botha's Hill, in Natal, in 1964. Jonty Driver, the NUSAS president, presented a paper structured around two rival views of which way the student organisation should go. One view (proposed by Magnus Gunther) advocated a status quo approach. NUSAS would remain a liberal body, with overwhelmingly white membership. The other view was by Martin. He had attended a Pan-African student meeting in Dar-es-Salaam, at which NUSAS was attacked for not representing black students. He wrote to Driver, arguing that 'a white-dominated and white-led organisation' was an anachronism, and that to become a significant anti-apartheid force NUSAS should become 'a wing of the liberation movement', and an organisation with black majority membership, while remaining non-racial. Driver's paper was leaked to the press, and Martin's proposal made headlines (although the view was attributed to Driver.) This is a tiny detail in the biography of such a remarkable thinker and activist, and Martin's intervention was less influential than many subsequent ones. But I choose to remember it at his memorial service, because it prefigured and anticipated so much that followed: Martin's critique of liberalism; his whole-hearted identification with the liberation movement; his vanguard position relative to his peers; and the indivisibility of his theory and practice as a radical.

John Saul:

At the beginning of this decade (November, 2010) I was asked to come to South Africa to present a keynote address for a "Conference in Honour of Martin Legassick" that was to be held at the Red Location in Port Elizabeth. It was, in fact, a great honour for me to be invited by the organizers to do so and I gladly accepted, just as I am honoured to have been asked by Leo Zeilig to write briefly of Martin here on the sad occasion of his recent passing.

In fact, as a friend of Martin's, I began my Port Elizabeth talk in 2010 with a few more

personal words related to such realities. For, as I then said, it would be impossible for me, then or now, to overestimate all that I have learned from Martin Legassick about both class struggle and South Africa – especially since the night, 30 or more years ago, when I met with him and several of his comrades in the dingy office of their "Marxist Worker's Tendency of the ANC" in a dark and rain-swept corner of London's East-End. I was there, at his invitation, to have Martin's case and that of his colleagues explained to me in order that I might relay it accurately to anti-apartheid activists in Canada. I won't say that I agreed with everything Martin told me then, nor would I agree with him on every issue today. But I agreed more often than not and, in addition, have always admired and respected Martin, his strength of character and his dedication both to principle and to struggle. I remember, in particular and in this respect, one revealing story from his last stormy days in the ANC. At some important meeting or other of the movement in London, years ago when he was under stern fire from the powers-that-be of the ANC, he approached another similarly beleaguered member of the organization in the lobby and said to him militantly: 'X, we've got to stand up to them... this may be our last chance.' The other person's reply: 'You stand up to them, Martin. I'm already on my knees.' Rest assured: Martin was never on his knees to anybody!

Patrick Bond:

Martin was robust, forceful and utterly principled, apparently not caring if the distant margins of the political and academic worlds were his life's home. Political relevance seemed important to Martin only if he looked across, horizontally, to his comrades, never vertically upwards to garner the bogus credibility that so many professional intellectuals seek. His anger was unforgettable, like a pure flame, and I was one to experience it – with various singses still in my memory – and yet I always knew it came from a good place. But he could also channel that energy, deploying his eloquence and likewise his demands on us all with sharp, short clarity, unmistakable for its revolutionary political import. When facing leaders of the National Union of Mineworkers at an all-in labour-community conference of Amandla! magazine in late 2012, he was the only one amongst us who felt the urgency and courage to ask the necessary tough questions about Marikana, for example. Indeed, his personal fuel carried that strong odour of the arrogance that comes from fearless truth-telling, which he did as well as anyone I've ever met in South Africa. He lit veld-fires all over the intellectual landscape dating (quite remarkably) to 1964 in the New Left Review. His intellectual legacy provides the great historical sweeps, the micro-details so lovingly uncovered, and the thoughtful – never hackish – recourse to Marxist political-economic theory and historical materialist method. These are what I will always read from Martin's dozens of major works, and what I will aspire to emulate. More power to his legacy: an exceptionally high standard of intellectual and political morality.

Uma Meshtrie:

When a colleague dies one is filled with sadness as if a family member had died for we spend many hours of our working lives together and we often try to pursue joint visions. Emeritus Professor Martin Legassick of the History. Department of the University of the Western. Cape passed away this morning. We started out at roughly the same time at UWC and I taught with him as a team on so many courses. We waged many joint struggles. Martin was passionate about the poor and the workers and was prepared to fight against injustice. RIP colleague. I learnt a lot from you and it was a privilege to teach with you.

Duncan Innes

Some Memories and Recollections about our work together at Warwick University: 1977 – 1981

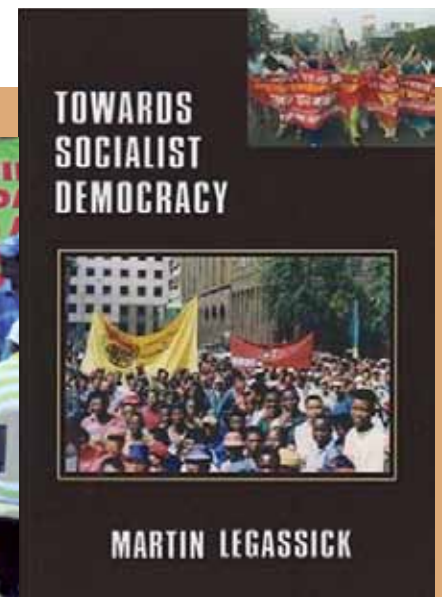
I first met Martin when I was studying for my PhD at Sussex University and he was lecturing at Warwick University. From the very beginning it was clear that Martin had a brilliant mind and, at that stage, he had already made a significant contribution to challenging the liberal historiography that had dominated South African academic work for decades. Martin and I, as well as academic colleagues such as Dan O'Meara, had many discussions on how we could take the new Marxist historiography forward in a more systematic way.

We finally decided to set up what was called "The South African Project" at Warwick University. Our aim was threefold:

- first, to promote the new Marxist historiography of South Africa based on our academic research and writing;
- secondly, to participate more directly and actively in exile politics. This involved doing things like doing research for the ANC and assisting in policy discussions.
- And thirdly, during this time we formed an informal editorial committee for a publication called "Workers' Unity" which the ANC and SACTU circulated underground among the new black unions that were developing in South Africa at that time. Although the ANC finally prevented the editorial committee from continuing with its work, it did have a significant impact for a limited time among the new worker leaders in South Africa.

But by this time, the South African project was starting to close down and we all went our separate ways. Martin, who was battling to reconcile his academic work with his political activism, left Warwick University to become a full time political activist.

Finally, at a personal level, I owe Martin a debt of gratitude for the way in which he helped me complete my PhD thesis for Sussex University. My supervisor had by this time left Sussex and had gone to the USA which left me without any supervision of my thesis. Martin understood my predicament and offered to read some of the draft chapters I had already written and to give me feedback on them. I found his comments to be extremely helpful and I incorporated many of his ideas into my work. I have no doubt that my thesis was a lot better as a result of his intervention.



Martin Legassick

Obituary

Published in *City Press*, 6 March 2016

In the hours following the announcement of Martin Legassick's passing, scores of messages of condolences streamed in from across the world. Written by activists, former students, professors and workers, they contained a common thread: he was an exemplary scholar and committed socialist activist.

Legassick was born in Edinburgh in 1940 and seven years later moved with his parents to live in South Africa. The Sharpeville massacre was a turning point for him, leading to a life of activism. As a student at UCT he joined NUSAS but soon came to the conclusion that a "white-dominated and white-led organization was . . . an anachronism as an anti-apartheid force". While studying in Britain he linked up with the ANC and became heavily involved in the international anti-apartheid movement. In the mid-1960s he enrolled at the University of California, Los Angeles, where he and Ben Magubane established the South Africa Freedom Action Committee. Legassick's politics were profoundly shaped by the anti-colonial movement and he spent a year in Ghana because, in his words, "I wanted the experience of living in an independent black African country". Theoretically, he was inspired by Frantz Fanon's critique of post-independence rulers on the continent. He also imbibed the energy and ideas of the anti-war and Civil Rights movements, especially the Black Panthers, while his Marxism was heavily influenced by the New Left critiques of Stalinist dogma. He later described himself as having become a "radical socialist" during this period.

At the same time he began to excel as a scholar. His doctoral thesis on the Cape northern frontier in the 19th century was regarded as a pioneering piece of scholarship on the idea of the 'frontier zone'. In the early 1970s, Legassick emerged, with other intellectuals such as Harold Wolpe, as a leading figure of revisionist historiography. Deploying Marxist analyses, they critiqued liberal scholarship and explained the functional relationship between apartheid and capitalism. Legassick wrote a series of seminal essays, which redefined South African historiography, and inspired a new wave of radical scholarship. In 1974 he was appointed as a lecturer at the University of Warwick, suggesting the beginnings of a formal university career.

But South Africa was on the cusp of a new political era, inaugurated by the 1973 Durban workers' strike and the subsequent emergence of an independent trade union movement.



These developments and the student uprising of 1976 led Legassick onto a new path of political activism. He linked up with Dave Hemson, Rob Petersen and Paula Ensor who had been involved in the new union movement and, after 1976, with Black Consciousness activists. They worked with SACTU in exile to build direct links with workers in South Africa. However, the SACTU leadership, under the influence of the SACP, opposed these efforts. The contestation on this issue, and others, led to their suspension in 1979 from the ANC. This group constituted itself as the Marxist Workers' Tendency of the ANC and published the influential theoretical journal, *Inqaba ya Basebenzi*, and from the late 1980s the paper, *Congress Militant*. Legassick played a pivotal editorial and educational role in both publications. In 1981 he resigned his university post to become a full-time political activist.

On his return from exile, Legassick joined the University of the Western Cape as a professor in History, where he quickly established himself as a supportive supervisor, while collaborating with his new colleagues on various research projects. Crucially, he immersed himself in working class struggles in Cape Town, especially on housing in Khayelitsha. With local activist, he wrote numerous articles and pamphlets on the housing crisis and proposed plans for building decent and affordable public housing for all. In what is arguably his major political publication, *Towards Socialist Democracy*, Legassick mounted an incisive critique of the ANC's neoliberal agenda, which he argued was a root cause of the deepening poverty and widening inequality in South Africa. He was saddened and angered by the Marikana massacre. In the last years of his life he contributed to efforts to reconfigure the left and was hopeful that a new emancipatory movement would emerge from the struggles on the mines, farms and campuses.

Noor Nieftagodien

Martin Legassick

Friend, comrade and taskmaster

Martin Legassick was my friend, comrade and taskmaster. Apart from collaborating in building the Democratic Left Front (DLF), working on DLF media together, and stomping around townships supporting various community struggles, we would frequently meet for tea, where I would be expected to update Martin on efforts to involve working class communities and movements in broader processes of regrouping the left. Should you be late in completing your article or any other task you had been assigned, he would be on your cell phone or emailing you to remind you, not-so-gently, of your responsibilities.

Martin and I became close during the several trips we made to Rustenburg to support the platinum mine workers during the 2012 mass strike. Sharing rooms in cheap guesthouses was one way of getting to know this generally shy and self-effacing human being. Martin was not a sociable, easy-going person. He was not easy to get close to. But once you gained his confidence, he was loyal and caring in his own way.

Martin lived for politics. Not the politics of opportunism and self-advancement that has become so prominent in South Africa today. For Martin it was the politics of commitment and sacrifice, where what you believed must shape how you lived your life.

Martin was a man of the people. He lived for the poor, not just in South Africa but internationally. What marked Martin as different from many socialist intellectuals was how he lived the dictum that the “emancipation of the working classes must be achieved by the working classes themselves”. He dedicated his life to serving poor and working people – the downtrodden and the dispossessed. Where he was generally gruff and impatient with intellectuals and other middle class people, especially those who put on airs, he had the patience of Job with community-based activists and other poor people. He foreswore the comforts that his academic life provided to stamp through informal settlements, so-called temporary relocation areas and impoverished townships to support struggles for decent houses, services and jobs. He was the antithesis of the armchair revolutionary.

Martin was a socialist whose ideas never stood still. His ideas developed primarily through his engagement with the ‘proletariat’, that is, the people valued ‘only for their ability to produce children’. He firmly rejected top-down approaches to socialism. He was not just for democratic socialism but for ecosocialism, a vision of society in harmony with nature and



which takes into account the ecological catastrophe facing humanity. He deplored dogma and sectarianism and right up to the time of his death engaged in ideas of how socialism can be made more relevant.

Yet Martin was firm when it came to principle and was not moved by fads, fashions and the flighty post-modernist theories. Without rejecting the ideas of Lenin, Trotsky, Luxemburg, etc., he was clear that our compass must be tuned more to Marx’s critique of capitalism and that the mere repetition of formulae drawn from a previous periods of socialist combat would condemn us to irrelevance. Strategy and tactics would have to be redeveloped using the Marxist method, but taking into account the substantial changes within capitalism and within the social formations we operated in.

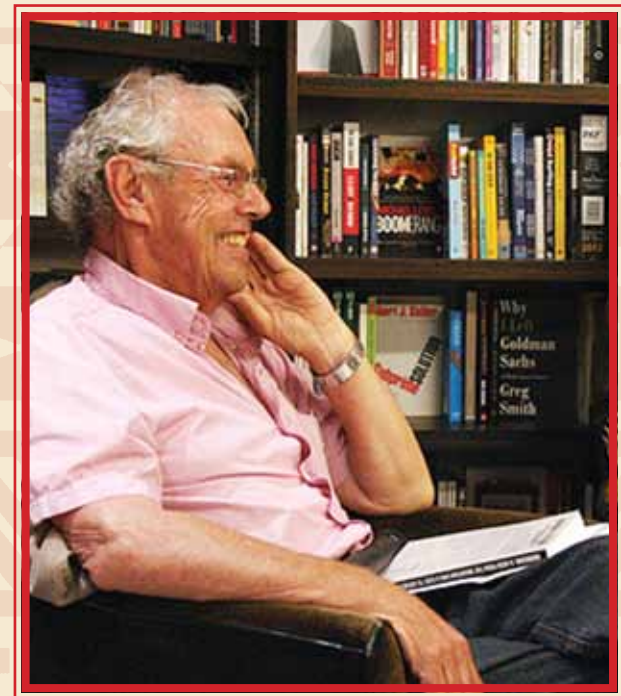
Like all people born in this world, Martin had weaknesses and made mistakes, yet he was an exemplary human being from whom we can learn much. I know I am still learning from him.

Brian Ashley



Martin Legassick

Messages of condolence,
remembrance, solidarity



Hamba Kahle revolutionary socialist scholar,
internationalist and fighter for the working class!

