Tony Ehrenreich
Working-Class Hero

Tony Ehrenreich is a quintessential member of the South African working class. Born in Parow in the Western Cape in 1962, his family was forcibly removed when the area was declared a white residential suburb. He became a member of the Committee of 81, a student organisation representing schools in the Western Cape, during the 1976 student rebellion. In 1985 he joined the merchant navy where he worked for two years, before serving his apprenticeship as a motor mechanic in Cape Town. He participated in the 1987 national strike and later became a shop steward for NUMSA, later working for both NUMSA and COSATU. He later assumed the position of national deputy general secretary of COSATU in Johannesburg. Subsequent to his return to Cape Town, he was elected provincial secretary of COSATU in the Western Cape.

In June 2009 he was re-elected to this position, and in May 2011 was elected as an ANC member of the Cape Town City Council.

Tony Ehrenreich is referred to as a “working-class hero” among the poor and in trade union circles. He points out that workers probably spend two-thirds of their time outside the workplace which, he explains, is why he agreed to stand for elected office in the 2011 Cape Town municipal elections. “My concern is to improve the conditions under which workers and the poor are expected to live in and around the city. This ranges from decent transport, accessible housing, amenities, sporting facilities and human respect.”

“I am fighting for a cause that is bigger than me and my co-workers.”
He firmly believes that “another world is possible”. “I suppose it is a bit like working for the kingdom of God, but no, I am not a religious believer.” Raised a Roman Catholic, he occasionally goes to Mass, arguing that over time more good has probably been done through religion than most other institutions. “I just don’t find that my ultimate questions are adequately addressed through organised religion. So, for me, it is a case of *a luta continua* in the quest for spiritual and intellectual meaning, as well as social change. These go hand-in-hand for me.”

Hard-working to a fault, he admits that the criticism he receives for being involved in most Western Cape social crises is of his own making. A senior government official insists that “wherever the prevailing system is under attack, you’ll find Tony involved.” This is illustrated by his involvement in the decision by people from 25 communities to gather on the Rondebosch Common on the weekend of 28-29 January 2012 in protest against the shortage of housing for the poor in the city. He insists that this is a symbolic action. “It is not land invasion as some councillors have called it. We are committed to honest dialogue to ensure the needs of the poor are taken seriously,” he says.

Ehrenreich is a man of extraordinary energy, with a commitment to live a principled life. “I try to live my values,” he says. Ready to listen to the views of his adversaries and those who fail to share his economic and political objectives, he speaks with appreciation of the good intent of those whose approach to problems differs from his own. Even those who are most sceptical of his straight talk and support for worker demands, mostly concede they are dealing with an honest but tough opponent. He is at the same time unashamedly blunt and outspoken in support of worker rights, which raises the ire of his opponents.

**Broad exposure**

“I am a working-class chap, who grew up to see things from the perspective of workers and unemployed people, who face the daily grind of poverty and abuse. These are my people. I live and work with them on a daily basis and have an innate commitment to serve their needs. I have, on the other hand, been privileged to be exposed to the bigger challenges of economic transformation, worker policy development and broader political needs.”

Ehrenreich’s work in the trade unions has given him a broad exposure to both shop-floor politics and community exposure. He tells of the first public
speech he gave in Gugulethu in 1989. “I was incredibly nervous; I carefully wrote out my speech and learned it off by heart. I could recite it in my sleep. I knew exactly what I wanted to say. The problem came when I stood up to speak. I had no sooner started my speech when I lost my place on the pages in front of me. I went a complete blank and had perspiration pouring off me. After what seemed to be ages I found my place and read the rest of my speech without looking up. It was my baptism of fire and probably the worst speech I had ever made. I thought I’d never become a public speaker and so concentrated on community work. For me, public speaking came later.”

“Our task as unionists,” he argues, “is not only to deal with shop-floor issues but with everything that affects the lives of our people.” When 10 000 residents of the Joe Slovo informal settlement were left homeless by a fire that destroyed 3 000 shacks Ehrenreich personally invited Noni Mpahlwa and her four children to stay in his home. When the predominantly black residents of Imizamo Yethu informal settlement, the coloured residents of the Hangberg area and the white residents of Hout Bay were locked in a bitter land conflict, he arranged for the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation to bring community people together to find a solution. “He can be an absolute pain-in-the-ass,” a high profile opponent of Ehrenreich in Hout Bay observed. “But, yes,” she added, “in my better moments, I realise that I am dealing with an honest man, who represents a significant constituency of people in this country. It would be foolish to ignore his voice and actions.”

During his two-and-a-half year stint at the NUMSA head office in Johannesburg, he dealt with policy issues and national concerns ranging from pensions and wage negotiations to practices around worker discipline and skills training. He worked closely with ANC alliance partners, travelled to different parts of the country and represented the trade unions in conferences elsewhere in the world. He speaks of attending a conference in Ghana in 1995 to protest the execution of Nigerian activist, Ken Saro-Wiwa. “I engaged trade unionists and others from across the African continent, gaining first-hand experience of worker solidarity extending beyond South Africa.” COSATU general secretary at the time, Mbhazima (Sam) Shilowa, was also present. “I am a person who gets up early in the morning, but invariably found that Sam had already done his exercise and was preparing for the day’s work. I learned from him that success is dependent on getting up in the morning, hard work, preparation and dedication. No short cuts and no slacking.”

Upon completing his time in the NUMSA head office, Ehrenreich
returned to Cape Town to take up the position of Western Cape provincial secretary in COSATU. His exposure to the international trade union movement increased. He was elected as a South African representative to the World Trade Organisation in Geneva, and later invited by the US Embassy in South Africa to visit the US, where he registered for a course in trade and industrial policy at Duke University. On his return to South Africa, James Joseph, a former US Ambassador to South Africa, invited him to participate in the Emerging Leaders Programme, based jointly at the University of Cape Town (UCT) and Duke University. Reflecting on the experiences he had in Geneva and the US, he remarks wistfully: “I have had some amazing experiences working with a cross-section of world-class people. Sometimes we saw things very differently from one another but I learned an incredible amount from them.” He was appointed to the Millennium Labour Council in South Africa, which was formed in 2000 and consisted of twelve representatives from business and the trade unions. “I was forced to look at the bigger picture of economic development in South Africa, realising that workers and beggars can’t be choosers. The unions have to work with those representing business interests. The challenge is how to manage and develop this relationship. Without getting that right no one wins.”

The importance of leadership

Ehrenreich prioritises relationship building in his engagement with others – his co-workers as well as his opponents. There are many who get frustrated in dealing with his tenacity but, political rancour aside, few who regard him as rude or deliberately devious. He insists that respect for others, not least one’s adversaries, is the basis for good negotiation and leadership. “If you cannot see beyond a particular conflict to the humanity of an opponent,” he insists, “you are not going to make progress in dispute resolution or begin to reach towards finding a new paradigm within which to address the country’s needs. You need at the same time, to ensure that you understand the intent and goals of your opponent and that he or she understands yours. There is no point papering over your differences for the sake of pretending you have agreement. Respect and trust have to emerge from honest disagreement and, where necessary, from open confrontation.”

Ehrenreich speaks about the trade union traditions of strikes, marches and public confrontations with government and business. “There comes a time when workers need the space in which to express their frustrations
and needs. Sometimes mass action is the only way they can do this. It gives workers, who are often at the bottom of the power struggle, an opportunity to assert their power and affirm their dignity as people. This is important. If people have no dignity and self-worth they cannot negotiate a fair and honest deal. The tragedy is that often it is only when unions either threaten to strike or take to the streets that government and business begin to respect them as people and to take their demands seriously.”

He admits that sometimes there are *agents provocateurs* who exploit the industrial actions of workers and insists that they be “identified, disciplined and, where necessary, removed from the scene”. He recalls with anger the events surrounding the May Day security guard strike in 2006. “There were thugs involved, who were breaking shop windows and robbing stores. I showed up and tried to calm the situation. Without any attempt to understand my role in the situation, the police grabbed hold of me, stuffing me into a police van. I suffer from claustrophobia; I panicked and was furious with the police who showed no apparent sense of discretion or understanding of what was going on. I was held in a police cell and later released.” He sees discipline, restraint and purpose as key ingredients of worker action. “This is not always easy to ensure in the heat of the moment. Feelings are running high on all sides. Protesters are angry, the police are agitated and the media are looking to focus on the first sign of violence. But things are improving. Think of the violent clashes between protesters and the police in the days of apartheid. There is today better discipline and leadership on both sides.”

Ehrenreich is, however, concerned that relations between workers and government are under increasing strain. He argues that the ANC leadership has increasingly aligned itself with business, as opposed to workers. He sees the government’s failure to meet the demands for better salaries for teachers, health workers and others in the public service as an illustration of its undermining of its social and political contract with workers. “The essential problem that underlies the stand-off with workers is not money,” he maintains. “There is enough money around. The country has money to buy arms, to pay consultants, to meet exorbitant executive and ministerial salaries, to build world-class sports stadia and to host the FIFA Soccer World Cup. The problem is the determination of an elite group in government and business to control profit margins and perpetuate the subservience of workers.” He refers to Professor SJ (Sampie) Terreblanche’s *A History of Inequality in South Africa, 1652–2002* where the agreement facilitated by Thabo Mbeki between
the ANC and white business leaders at the time of the CODESA talks is discussed. He argues that this entrenched the economic system prevailing at the time that favoured the rich at the expense of the poor. “All that happened,” he says, “is that space was created to ensure the emergence of a black elite who today live in a cosy relationship with a white elite.” This, he argues, constitutes a basic violation of declared ANC policy, the Constitution and the essential values of the 1994 democratic settlement. “The economic woes of the nation, the impoverishment of the poor and the conflict within the ANC,” he predicts, “will intensify until this matter is revisited and resolved.”

Arguing that there are huge vested interests in the ANC government that feed off worker dependency, Ehrenreich says this has persuaded some workers and others that it will take a “full-blown revolution” for their needs to be met. “On the more positive side,” he argues, “there is a growing realisation in society as a whole that the salaries of teachers, health workers and others are morally unacceptable and practically unsustainable.” He speaks at length of the growing resentment of professional workers, claiming that “the most dedicated and professionally-skilled workers who teach our children and care for the patients in hospitals and clinics are simply not willing or able to render decent services if they are not respected by society and suitably rewarded.”

Asked about the role of SADTU in the education crisis, he argues that their actions are sometimes quite unacceptable. He insists: “The behaviour of these teachers is a violation of the custodianship of the values and goals that they are supposed to convey to our children. SADTU is, however, only ten percent of the problem inherent to the education crisis. The major problems are the lack of facilities in the poorer schools as well as corruption and mismanagement by the education departments. We cannot expect teachers, working for an inadequate salary in atrocious working conditions, to mend their ways when they are not supported in their work. Teachers in these schools are facing almost impossible situations. Children are on tik and other drugs. School textbooks are not delivered, classrooms and the ablution facilities are in disgusting conditions, and teachers are being threatened by thugs and gangsters.”

Ehrenreich responds to Finance Minister Pravin Gordhan’s concern about the state’s increasing wage bill, by saying: “This problem can only be resolved through a holistic approach whereby there is a national agreement to control the escalation of salaries paid in the private sector, to increase the salaries in the public sector, to revisit the question of ‘state debt service costs’”
(the interest that the government pays on the money borrowed largely during the apartheid period), and to increase taxes in a situation where tax revenue is shrinking.”

Ehrenreich is adamant that a “new understanding” through a national dialogue needs to be found regarding these matters. He insists that executive salaries are “outrageously ridiculous”, and that people in civil society and the unions are in many instances “being paid too much”. He suggests that his R20 000 a month salary, plus a travelling and housing allowance ought to be reduced. “The danger is that the wage gap between workers and union officials can separate union leaders from their lowest paid members.” Not all union members share Ehrenreich’s views on union salaries. “I cannot win all my battles so I have temporarily privatised this one!” he says. He uses part of his monthly salary to pay the wages of a staff member in his office and supports HIV/AIDS work through the salary he earns as a City Councillor.

“The nation as a whole – including COSATU, business and government – needs to debate salaries,” he says. “We are told that the global demand for scarce skills requires us to pay competitive salaries in order to hold onto our most skilled managers and professional people. Well, this is where values and leadership come in. We need to reassess what it means to contribute towards the building of a more equitable society without asking the lowest-paid workers to subsidise the lavish lifestyles of their bosses and the political elite. A values-driven, people-centred society involves more than monetary rewards. Leaders ought to promote these values not only in what they say but in their behaviour.”

He ponders the question concerning the nature of what he calls “conscious leadership”, speaking about what makes some people better leaders than others, suggesting this involves getting the right balance between the analysis and clarification of a problem on the one hand and an understanding of the emotions involved on the other. “It is the ‘feeling’ side of things, erroneously interpreted as ‘soft concerns’, that tends to be neglected in negotiations between business leaders and workers,” he argues. Referring to years of resentment between workers and employers, he argues that there are things that need to be talked about and where possible redressed as a basis on which to build viable labour relations in South Africa. “For this to happen,” he continues, “workers need to be persuaded that their concerns are being heard and addressed. Only then can a context be created within which issues of poverty, wages and other worker resentments can be resolved.”
Great seduction

Accepting that a commitment to “a better life for all” is increasingly difficult to realise in a changing and competitive South Africa, Ehrenreich speaks of money and personal gain as the great seduction. “We have swung from one extreme to another. In the old days a leader who was disloyal to the ANC structures got killed. Today that person gets a BEE deal in an attempt to regain his or her support.”

“There are few who can resist the temptation to have and own more than they need or can ever spend,” Ehrenreich suggests. “The new political and economic elite get bolder every day. They say they did not join the ANC to be poor. Well, some of us did not join the ANC to get wealthy. We joined it to build a better life for all. I am embarrassed to see the size and quality of cars, SUVs and chauffeur-driven limousines that draw up outside Luthuli House in Johannesburg.”

Referring to the ANC’s 52nd National Conference in Polokwane in 2007, he says: “The Polokwane agenda was ours. Strategically we in COSATU got the ANC to agree to what we wanted. The problem is policy implementation and the lack of delivery on basic services, at the basis of which is a deep systemic problem that benefits the ‘haves’ at the cost of the ‘have-nots’. That’s the way the system works. If you are in the system you are well cared for. If you are outside the system or clinging to its edges you are in trouble. Our commitment is to see the birth of a different system and new dispensation in South Africa.”

Ehrenreich’s concern is that “the established white elite are benefitting from the emerging prosperity of the black elite”. This, he suggests, results in an ironic situation in which “black struggle credentials are being used to give legitimacy to an ownership structure that was forged in colonialism and apartheid”. He sees this brand of BEE as “a crude attempt at building a middle class that marginalises and excludes the majority of black South Africans. Unemployment has gone up and inequality has increased. Even where the government has increased its social services, the absolute level of poverty has increased. Tax adjustments have put nearly R60 billion into the pockets of upper-income earners and corporations while trade liberalisation has led to thousands of jobs being lost due to tariff cuts and import parity pricing. The lifting of exchange controls has, in turn, helped some South African multinational companies, that made their wealth on our shores, to move their primary listings to the London and New York stock exchanges.” Conceding the complexity of globalisation and the good intent to grow the
economy, “with the hope that this would benefit the poor”, his argument is that “government must accept that its policy choices have failed to meet the needs of the poor and so they cannot continue with business as usual. That is what the Polokwane demands were all about.”

He poses the question whether the workers would have been worse off without the implementation of GEAR (Growth, Employment and Redistribution Strategy). “It’s difficult to answer that one,” he suggests. “What is clear is that the notion of globalisation requires that South Africa becomes a modern efficient state, driven by technical competence to the neglect of political considerations.” This, he argues “is a recipe for the perpetuation of a system within which the rich effectively get richer and the poor poorer. The choices we face in the economy are various and we need to wrestle with the options we face. We cannot afford to throw away the industrial advances we have made, but we need to think again how to ensure that the wealth generated through trade and industry in South Africa benefits the rapidly rising numbers of unemployed and poor people in our country. Unless government takes cognisance of the impact that current economic policies are having on its political legitimacy and credibility, the country is in for a rough ride. COSATU is closer to workers and the poor than the ANC. We are increasingly aware of worker anger and have a responsibility to alert the nation to the alienation of the poor who have traditionally supported the ANC-led alliance. Poverty is endemic to current economic policy and there need to be more state interventions to ensure that the poor have sufficient reason not to resort to acts of desperation and anarchistic behaviour.”

Ehrenreich is concerned that the contest between the free market and social democratic schools of thought in the ANC-led alliance is becoming increasingly abrasive and unconstructive. He proposes several interventions that are needed to give birth to an innovative economic policy that could alleviate the needs of the poor. He prioritises four such interventions:

- An uncompromising crackdown on corruption, which he insists is as rife in the private sector as it is in government. “It needs to be dealt with wherever it is found. If ministers are found to be corrupt they need to be fired and charges must be laid against them and pursued through the courts.” Ehrenreich further argues that corruption is often too narrowly defined and that it needs to be understood in its broader context. “We must also pay attention to the growing incidence of moral corruption where civil servants are not doing their work, budgets are being irresponsibly
spent or underspent, civil society organisations are not meeting the basic needs of the poor and managers are turning a blind eye to the poor performance of workers. Not only is this conduct dishonest, it is corrupt – and needs to be named as such.”

- More government investment in basic services ranging from police and security to education, health care and transportation, giving the poor access to basic services that the wealthy enjoy through private companies and acquisitions.

- The generation of work programmes that go well beyond the government’s Expanded Public Works Programme and its Sector Education and Training Authority (SETA) initiatives. He argues that government initiatives in this regard need to be more along the lines of Franklin D Roosevelt’s New Deal within which Roosevelt promoted banking reforms, housing developments and related initiatives aimed at reversing unemployment and getting people back to work, while at the same time improving social services. Ehrenreich reminds us of the opposition Roosevelt encountered in Congress, which included opposition from his own party and from the business sector. “Change and support for the working class is never easy,” Ehrenreich insists. “This is why leadership is so important. Roosevelt initiated his so-called ‘fire-side’ chats; he visited poor and working-class communities to ensure that he understood the needs of his people, and ultimately got the support needed from the American people to implement his reforms. We simply do not have that kind of political leadership in South Africa at present,” he concludes, arguing that there is “an urgent need for a national debate involving government, business and labour to address poverty, unemployment relief and job creation”. Unless we focus on these priorities, he suggests that “the 1994 dream could become a nightmare.”

- The leverage of resources, involving money and skills, needed to meet an appropriate transformation programme. This he sees as involving foreign direct investment and a competitive industry. “It also involves a serious political discussion around a focussed redistribution of the country’s wealth through a limited-period modest tax increase on wealthy South Africans.” He reminds us that the TRC suggested this as a way of providing reparations and relief for apartheid victims, but the government rejected it. Ehrenreich is convinced that there are sufficient reasonable people in South Africa to support such an initiative, provided it is well organised,
adequately promoted across political lines and implemented with ruthless efficiency. “We need to reverse the hostilities between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’ in the country to the benefit of us all. We need one another and we need to strike a new deal.”

**Inner self**

Ehrenreich returns to the theme of “another world”. This is not an abstract world, not a religious world or a world that replaces the present one. For him, it is a world that can only grow out of the contradictions of the present reality where those who benefit from the *status quo* and those who are alienated from it engage one another in search of a different way of ordering the economy. “Some people have their ostentatious houses and fancy cars. If it makes them happy it’s okay by me, provided it is not at the cost of the poor – which it invariably is.”

There are two striking dimensions of Ehrenreich’s person:

- His lifestyle reflects his assertion that he does not find material acquisitions particularly attractive or seductive. “I’ve been exposed to the most extravagant and generous hospitality of others and, yes, I have had opportunities to pursue self-enrichment. I somehow do not find the lure of riches very convincing or attractive. Material things simply don’t appeal to me. I am no saint or hermit, but I try to live modestly.” He finds Julius Malema’s R200 000 wristwatch totally repugnant, not least because he claims to be a champion of the poor, arguing that Malema’s wealth and extravagant lifestyle is a blatant denial of any claim he makes about working for the poor. “He is an embarrassment to the ANC,” he concludes. “He deserves the absolute contempt he has managed to earn himself among working-class people.”

“Corruption and obscene wealth are destroying the soul of the struggle that gave birth to democracy in 1994,” Ehrenreich observes further, with a sense of pathos. Choosing his words carefully, he says: “The biggest problem we face is not the guy who embezzles R100 000 – yes, that person needs to be exposed, publicly shamed and prosecuted. But the real problem is the systemic corruption that is part of our way of doing business that creates the opportunity for people to be bribed and to open the way to fraudulent business practices, in the name of black empowerment and the pretence of job creation. We need to go back to the basics, asking ourselves how unemployed and exploited workers can begin to benefit from the excess wealth that lands up in the hands of the elite.”
• Ehrenreich is an entrepreneur. He has built himself a modest house in the working-class, essentially coloured, township of Uitsig. He has also built a “holiday house” in Kleinmond. Having bought the property several years ago he got his family and friends involved, applying his organisational skills and “discovering my own construction abilities” to build a house to which his family, friends and COSATU colleagues have free access. An article in the *Sunday Times* is entitled “My house is your house, comrades”. He speaks of basic human needs as including leisure and the meaning that comes from working on a project which one sees coming to completion.

Karl Marx once said “man is a maker.” Ehrenreich describes his work in trade unions, as “my entire life”. Beyond that, his Kleinmond house is a project that gives him “a sense of personal fulfilment”. He pauses. “But it’s an extravagance. Maybe I should get rid of it,” he says.

Ehrenreich is a deeply reflective person. He ponders what it means to be “an integrated and complete human being”. He thinks it has something to do with having what he calls “open hands”. “If you give, in a strange way you receive,” he says. He suggests being human involves relations with others. “Given my background and involvement with workers, this includes being in solidarity with those in most need.” He sees relationships and solidarity being manifest in the African notion of *ubuntu*, in the great religions of the world, and at the heart of worker solidarity across the world. “When concerned people support our work from Sweden, the US or Burundi I experience this solidarity. When someone tells me they are praying for me, I experience a human bond. This sense of human belonging reaches beyond religion, creed, race and gender. It is something we are perhaps all reaching for by virtue of being human – but all too often we fail to find the time to experience and promote it. Will we be able to realise this togetherness in our life time?” he asks. Answering his own question he says: “That we will only know if we give it a try – and the journey is as important as the goal. This is a journey that teaches us how to reach out towards one another across the barriers of race, class and gender. These are barriers that have torn this country apart. It is time to fix them.”