

**Memorial Service for Nelson Mandela,
St Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin
December 12, 2013**

Address by Congress General Secretary David Begg

In his preliminary public remarks on hearing of the death of Nelson Mandela, President Obama quoted Edwin Stanton's comment on hearing that Abraham Lincoln had died: "Now he belongs to the Ages."

Few people in history have inspired generations as Mandela has by the very quality of his life.

For the last few years of his captivity he was a world figure. It's easy to forget that for most of the time he was unknown outside of South Africa.

What fortitude it must have taken to keep going. Isolated from his family – unable even to attend his son's funeral in 1969 – he was subjected to deprivation and hostility and feared even for his life.

When, after 27 years in seclusion, he was eventually set free he did not step through the looking glass to emerge in wonderland. He emerged into a world of poverty, unemployment and violence.

What he had to contend with was the reality that for 50 years the Apartheid State had sought – and indeed managed – to marginalise and disempower South Africa's black citizens.

They were placed far from white cities often without electricity or running water, given inferior education and given little access to resources or rights. The result, aside from the obvious political implications of non-representation and repression, was that the gap between rich and poor in South Africa grew to immense proportions, virtually unequalled

anywhere else on the globe. Naturally enough, given Apartheid's implicit bias in favour of its white supporters and citizens, the wealth gap was also a racial gap.

The establishment of a non-racial government and society in these circumstances would have been a formidable challenge to any political leader. For somebody advanced in years who had endured a lifetime of hardship it seemed impossible. But Nelson Mandela, by virtue of his standing, his high principles and integrity did achieve an extraordinary transformation. On 27/28 April 1994 black and white people queued together for hours to vote. The result saw the ANC elected to power with 62 percent of the vote and Mandela elected President.

Nevertheless, the run up to the elections was a time of much violence involving followers of the Inkatha Freedom Party on the one hand and white supremacists on the other. More people were killed in 1993/94 than in the previous 30 years.

In my opinion Nelson Mandela's finest hour was when he spoke to the nation on television following the assassination of Chris Hani, leader of the South African Communist Party. Looking at Mandela's face on an old news film over the last few days you can see the grief etched into it.

The assassination was so brutal and such an affront to the policy of reconciliation that South Africa could have exploded. Mandela's intervention, pointing out that a white woman of Afrikaner descent had identified the assassin to police, calmed things down. No other person could have saved the country at such a critical juncture.

The triple alliance of ANC, the Communist Party, and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) in the struggle against Apartheid guaranteed the support of the trade union movement worldwide. Ireland was no exception.

Week after week thousands of trade union members participated in campaigns and rallies organised by Kader Asmal and his associates in the Irish Anti-Apartheid movement. Not that one had a lot of choice – Kader wouldn't take no for an answer.

In truth, of course, Nelson Mandela was the iconic inspiration for a whole generation. Trade union support for the struggle had its apotheosis in the Dunnes Stores strike in 1984 when a number of young women were suspended for refusing to handle South African fruit on the instruction of their union, Mandate. These were not radicals. They were good, decent young people who saw wrong and tried to right it.

I am pleased to say that they survived the experience and 30 years later they are all in South Africa this week to say farewell to the leader who inspired them to make the sacrifice they did.

In 1987 COSATU was at the cutting edge of the struggle against Apartheid. Sustained industrial action in the mines and transport sector was having a severe economic impact on the regime.

Trocaire was giving strong financial support to the unions and I went with a Congress delegation for Trocaire to see what further assistance we could give. I will never forget the sense of fear and oppression. It was palpable.

Cyril Ramaphosa was then the General Secretary of the Mineworkers Union and 18 of his members had been shot dead on the picket line. I was struck by his amazingly calm demeanour and absolute confidence that Mandela would lead his people to freedom.

I heard a South African commentator say on BBC yesterday that the greatest tribute to Nelson Mandela was that his country no longer needed him: his work was done.

But his continent needs to learn from his refusal to cling to power. All of us must take inspiration from his unbending commitment to equality.

In an address to the Court at the end of his trial in 1964 Nelson Mandela said:

“Africans want to be paid a living wage.....Africans want a just share in the whole of South Africa; they want security and a stake in society”.

It is a sobering thought that 50 years later many millions of Africans have to try to survive on less than \$1 a day in a world where the income of the richest 100 people is enough to end poverty.

Mandela’s mission lives on.