Vella Pillay died in July aged 80. Although he worked as a professional economist for most of his career in London, he was best known in South Africa (and in the UK too) for his work for the anti-apartheid movement.

He was born, one of six children, into a poor family in Johannesburg in October 1923 and went to a school reserved for Indians and Coloureds. From there, he went to Witwatersrand University where he studied part-time for a BCom. He paid for his studies and contributed to the family’s meagre income by working during the day as a bookkeeper for an Indian company, while attending lectures in the evening. His period at Witwatersrand coincided with an increasing political awareness amongst the students, since this was the period of German-Russian hostilities during the Second World War and popular support for Russia led many students to sympathise with communist ideology. Pillay himself joined the South African Communist Party, through which he met his future wife, Patsy Truebig, and became active in the South African Indian Congress, whose leadership was becoming increasingly radicalised. One of his early campaigns was against the ‘Pegging Act’ which sought to limit Indian residence and property ownership to designated areas.

He married Patsy, a woman of European/American origin in 1948 (in the Cape where interracial marriage was still legal) and they moved almost immediately to London. Pillay had been accepted by the London School of Economics where he enrolled as an evening student in order to be able to work during the day – initially as a researcher at the Bank of China. The Bank of China subsequently dominated his professional life. He rose to become assistant general manager in 1978 and retired from full-time employment with them in 1988 though he continued as an economic adviser.

The South African Communist Party was banned by the South African government in 1950 while the banning of the ANC followed in 1960. This meant that, in helping these organisations from London, Pillay was involved in a number of subversive activities. He helped publish the *African Communist* periodical, looked after the funds of the SACP and helped arrange military training in China and Russia for South African revolutionaries.

He helped found the British Anti-Apartheid movement in 1960 and contributed again through publications and the management of its money, as well as occupying a number of senior positions within the movement. This was a period in which he became distanced from the SACP which took a distinctly pro-Soviet attitude during the sino-soviet splits of the 1960s. He travelled regularly to China and was friendly with Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping, and his working for the Bank of China probably increased suspicions further. However, relations with the ANC remained close.

His anti-apartheid campaigning led him to a period with the Greater London Enterprise Board in the early 1980s when its objective was to invest some fraction of GLC funds in the kinds of projects that would improve opportunities for blacks and other ethnic minorities.

When it was clear that apartheid was crumbling and non-racial elections were scheduled for 1994, Pillay returned to South Africa where he worked with other economists in the Macroeconomic Research Group (MERG) on plans for a programme of economic growth intended to benefit the mass of South Africans. The ANC, maybe under pressure from Western governments, decided on a different route. However, while most of the recommendations were ignored, some, particularly its focus on large-scale housebuilding, continue to attract discussion.

He is survived by his wife and two sons.