

A tribute to worker leaders

There are times, when trying to chart the way forward, that we tend to forget and pay tribute to those who came before us. The **Labour Bulletin** pays tribute to three former trade unionists who died recently.

Moses Ndlovu, a stalwart of the labour movement in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal, died recently. He was an organiser for Ppwawu and also for a short period, Mawu. He taught the ropes to a whole generation of young trade unionists who emerged out the 1970s revival of the labour movement (see p66).

Wilton Mkwazi was another unionist who devoted more than half his life to the labour movement. He began organising workers from 1948 onwards when he organised a dock strike in Port Elizabeth. Although having retired as a stevedore in 1999, he was a leading light in the African Textile Workers Union and the SA Congress of Trade Unions (Sactu). He became involved in ANC politics which led to his arrest in 1960, as one of those charged in the Treason Trial. He was

released in error and went into exile. He returned to SA as a commander-in-chief of Umkhonto we Siswe and was rearrested in 1964 and charged with helping to organise MK. He was sentenced to life imprisonment on Robben Island. On his release, he got involved in the Eastern Cape legislature.

He was released from Robben Island in 1989, after having served 25 years in prison. This is an extract from an interview which appeared in the *SA Labour Bulletin* 14(6):

'Then I worked in PE (during late 1940s) for the railways as a stevedore... we did not really know properly what a union was. So we joined the staff association and attended meetings, but with no understanding about what we were doing. But later on I met two who told me and others about trade unions. That was the late Gladstone Tshume and Raymond Mhlaba. They were the ones who groomed me on reading in English and trade unions...

After working for the railways as a stevedore, I worked at Metal Box tin factory in Port Elizabeth. This was now 1950. There I joined a union. I was a shop steward and chairman of the executive and it went smoothly for some time. But we had problems because management did not want us as shop stewards collecting funds outside the factory. So as soon as we knocked off, while others were still having showers there, we rushed to the gate to collect. But we often found the municipal police there. You needed a permit to collect. They said that it was a public street in front of the gate...

This problem resulted in us doing something that I am still not sure was right. Once there was a funeral. We organised workers to attend that funeral. They found that having come for a funeral, they were asked there for their subscriptions. We were there collecting for the union. And when we look at those problems and we look at

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today's situation, you find that today that is not the case... Things then were not like you find today. Unions have lots of funds today and unionists are getting paid. But for us as secretaries and organisers, maybe we were told we were getting R30 a month. But if we got a straight R30 for three months in a year, that year was a good year for us. In other words we were not paid...

In our first years in jail, we did not hear much about developments at first. In fact it took some time before we knew about the strikes in Durban in 1973 when unions started to come up again. But we did begin to hear more in later years and we were proud... But there are some things that did not make us happy. For example, I think that the youth got too wild when they went around burning people. We were not happy about that. If a person thinks differently to you, you do not go and burn that person. You must try to talk to them. If your neighbour belongs to a different organisation, then you go to your meeting and he goes to his and then you come back and have coffee together. But we see situations now where neighbours will not even go to the funeral of the person who lived next door because of different politics. Now that is not our culture. So I think unity is very important. Cosatu and Nactu must talk to each other, they must invite each other to their meetings, we must see real unity in our struggle.'

LB

Moses Ndlovu

Pat Horn pays tribute...

Moses Ndlovu died in May 2004 before reaching the age of 60 years, almost unnoticed by the great trade union movement which he was instrumental in establishing.

The son of agricultural workers in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands, Moses experienced the injustice of the labour tenant system when his parents' employer ruled (against his parents' wishes) that he work on the farm rather than further his education. After many years of complying with the farmer's wishes in order not to jeopardise his parents' employment and accommodation, one day, in frustration, he drove the farm tractor onto a railway line where it was smashed by an oncoming train – causing the whole family to be evicted from the farm.

Moses was a prominent strike leader in a large Pietermaritzburg textile factory, which was one of the first to down tools in the rolling mass strikes of 1973 and 1974. Moses and other leaders were identified as instigators and dismissed. Moses then devoted his life to organising workers and building a strong trade union movement.

He had an amazing talent for recruiting workers, despite prevailing fears about the risks of belonging to unions in the aftermath of the repressive 1960s. Moses was a formidable organiser in the Pietermaritzburg area of the Trade Union Advisory and Co-ordinating Council (TUACC) which was the KwaZulu-Natal forerunner of what later became Fosatu (in 1979) and Cosatu (in late 1985). He gave workers confidence to turn their backs on their fear and join the struggle for democracy and their rights as workers.

At this time, the apartheid state was trying to avoid granting official recognition to trade unions of black workers by diverting them into a system of employer-controlled Liaison and Works Committees. They needed to stem the massive growth of the independent trade union movement after the 1973 strikes. In 1974 they banned four student leaders who had been prominent during the strikes. In 1976 they banned a further 27 trade unionists from the emerging trade union movement, and student activists who were working in support of this emerging movement. Moses was one of those trade unionists banned for five years from 1976 to 1982.

While he was banned, Moses could not openly recruit members and work for the trade unions. However, he was not idle. He was a highly respected community leader, active in school committees, the church and community organisations, and at the same time in local structures of the ANC underground.

When his banning order expired at the end of 1982, Moses went right back into the trade union movement – into Fosatu, which had been formed in 1979. Because of his formidable organising skills, Moses was taken on as an organiser to recruit workers for the different Fosatu unions operating in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands. The Pietermaritzburg local was a buzzing hive of activity, and trade union membership was rocketing skywards.

At this time the fledgling Pwawu (Paper Wood & Allied Workers Union) had its stronghold in the Transvaal (as it was then known) and had been organised in northern Natal by an active shop stewards council based in

Empangeni and Richards Bay. Moses' organising work made it possible to open a third regional structure of the union in southern Natal. He then participated in strategic organising campaigns in Durban – conducted jointly with Mawu (Metal & Allied Workers Union) and SFAWU (Sweet, Food & Allied Workers Union) – resulting in Pwawu unionising the largest factories in the industry, including those belonging to the industry giant Mondi Paper which controlled more than 50% of the industry. Negotiations between Pwawu and Fosatu for Moses' much-sought-after services eventually resulted in his being employed full-time by Pwawu.

Later developments saw Pwawu merge with various unions and eventually with the Chemical Workers Industrial Union (CWIU) to form the Ceppwawu of today. The farm and forestry workers of Pwawu (most of whom had been organised by Moses) went into the new farm workers' union (Sapaawu) which was formed by Cosatu in the 1990s. Moses also moved into Sapaawu.

At the time of his death, Moses was still living and working under difficult conditions in Pietermaritzburg, regarded by all in the community as a rock of dependability. His comrades and those who have seen the transition from the struggling fledgling trade union movement of the 1970s to the massively influential movement we have in South Africa today, can never forget the critical contribution of giants like Moses Ndlovu to building that movement. We will always be grateful that he touched our lives and we had the privilege of working with him.

LB

Nimrod Sejake

Nimrod Sekeramane Sejake, who died aged 83, was a South African political refugee in Ireland during the 1980s, when he became widely known in trade union and socialist circles for his campaigning work to raise the profile of the new South African unions.

Born in August 1920 in Evaton, south of Johannesburg, to Basotho parents, he attended mission school in Evaton, worked as a building site clerk, trained as a teacher, married, and settled in Jabavu, Soweto. As the National Party came to power in 1948 and sought to impose unprecedented racial discrimination under the rubric 'apartheid', Sejake joined the opposition. Noted for his ability as a union organiser, he became secretary of the non-racial, though mainly African, Iron and Steel Workers Union, affiliated to the South African Congress of Trade Unions (Sactu). His militant, uncompromising approach is recorded in *Organise or Starve*, the history of Sactu.

Sejake joined the African National Congress (ANC) and was active throughout the 1950s in its increasingly radical defiance campaign of demonstrations, strikes and burning of the hated pass books. He earned a reputation as a militant not given to compromise with the bosses – a trait that brought him into frequent conflict with the leadership of a congress movement far too ready to call off mass action on the basis of the promise of concessions by the apartheid regime and the bosses. He was active also in the Congress of the People of 1955 when the ANC adopted the Freedom Charter at Kliptown.

Sejake shared a cell with Nelson Mandela, when they were both arrested with 156 leaders of the ANC, Sactu and the SA Communist Party (SACP), accused of treason in the famous treason trial of 1956–61. The

NP government sought the death penalty for treason and, as oppression intensified, limiting the possibilities for legal political work, Sejake and others left the country through the then Basutoland for training in the Soviet Union. The treason trial accused were acquitted but the die was cast and Umkhonto We Sizwe (MK), the ANC's military wing, was founded to begin armed struggle against the apartheid regime.

Sejake spent a period studying Marxism in the USSR. He had been influenced by a teacher in Evaton in the 1930s, Johannes Nkosi, a leading member of the Communist Party. Nkosi had been sent to the Soviet Union where he fell foul of the Stalinist teachers and died in suspicious circumstances. Like others of the ANC and similar liberation movements, Sejake found that only the 'communist' states were prepared to provide arms and training, whatever criticisms they had of the system were not voiced then.

Sejake returned to Africa as political commissar in the ANC training camp in Morogoro, Tanzania. He was convinced of the central role of the organised working class in the liberation of South Africa, and insisted their priority should be to train activists in the ideas of Marxism, send them as cadres back to organise militant trade unions underground to bring down the regime. Such views led to a clash with the more conservative exiled leadership which prioritised the armed struggle and appeals to the United Nations.

Sejake was removed from his post. The President, Julius Nyerere, ordered his expulsion from Tanzania, a decision probably influenced by Mr Sejake's involvement in a Marxist circle at Dar es Salaam University which was critical of Nyerere's 'Ujaama', or African Socialism.

Exiled to Zambia, Sejake worked with the South African Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC),

seeking support for the organisation, before being deported to Egypt, where he lived in poverty while appealing for political asylum in Europe.

In the late 1970s, Sejake was offered asylum in three European countries and chose Ireland.

Living in the Red Cross Hostel in Ballsbridge, Sejake loved Ireland and never experienced racial abuse. He found kindred thinkers in the Militant Tendency of the Labour Party [forerunners of the Socialist Party] which had direct links, through the exiled Marxist Workers Tendency of the ANC [forerunner of the DSM], with these rapidly growing unions. A 'retying of the knot', he would say, after 25 years in exile.

In 1989 he spoke by phone to his wife and family with whom he had not been in contact for 30 years. The ANC was legalised, Mandela walked free, and the exiles returned, although his own return was delayed for months when he refused to complete the application for indemnity.

Reunited with his family, though 71 years of age, Sejake again threw himself into the struggle and was elected secretary of the Soweto ANC Veterans League and led delegations from Evaton to Pretoria to seek compensation for land seized during the 1950s. He also re-established links with the workers in heavy industry through the Metal and Allied Workers Union.

Although he voted for the ANC in the 1994 election, he insisted that the massive vote for the party would not be enough to transform life for the poor in South Africa. He was involved in campaigning for the Congress of South African Trade Unions to build a mass workers party.

LB

This is an edited version of an article obituary which appeared in The Irish Times.