



Joyce Mabudafhasi

Profile by JANE BARRETT

Every now and then Joyce Mabudafhasi, national treasurer of NEHAWU and one of COSATU's parliamentary list of 20, feels a little weary. As you will learn when you read on, at 50, and after 20 years of tireless activism, she has every right to feel that way. "But," she says, "whenever I'm tired I think of Comrade Mandela and how at 75 he is still addressing people day in and day out, still working around the clock." Inspired, Joyce then gets behind the wheel of her car again and heads off energetically to deal with any one of a thousand issues emanating from her role as trade unionist, human rights lobbyist, motivator and representative of rural women, education expert, and most recently, parliamentary candidate for the northern Transvaal.

Life on a mission station

Joyce Mabudafhasi was born in 1943, the

eldest child of a missionary-father and nurse mother. She grew up in the Transkei, but completed her schooling in Venda, where her father originally came from. Her experiences on the mission station were to profoundly shape her thinking and later political involvement. She witnessed her father working himself to the bone in building a Lutheran mission station from scratch, but being paid a pittance on a quarterly basis. After years of hard work, the only "perk" which was provided to him by the church was a bicycle. In contrast, a white preacher, who was posted to the mission years after Joyce's father, was provided with a newly built brick house, a monthly salary, and a car. Without Joyce's mother's small salary Joyce and her brothers and sisters would not have got a high school education. As a young girl Joyce couldn't help but note the irony and injustice of her parent's situation. Her sense of outrage at apartheid

and racism was enhanced when as a young woman living in Venda she was exposed to the conditions of abuse of workers on white-owned farms in the northern Transvaal.

Early working life

Joyce trained as a teacher and her first job was in a Soweto school. She moved back to the northern Transvaal when she married a sociology lecturer at the University of the North (Turfloop). By the time she was 23, she was widowed with two young children, her husband having been killed in a car accident while on field research with a group of his students. This was 1966. Meanwhile, Joyce had retrained to become a librarian and was herself working at Turfloop in the library.

Becoming an activist

In the mid 70s Joyce was moved by the extent of the education crisis nationally, and linked up with others in organising against

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Bantu education both in schools and in tertiary institutions. In 1976 she was arrested for the first time, under the notorious Terrorism Act, but charges were never brought against her. Joyce continued to work behind the scenes and underground on education issues until

the formation of the United Democratic Front in 1983. In 1984 Joyce was instrumental in introducing the UDF to the northern Transvaal, and became the region’s first secretary treasurer, with Chief Nchabaleng (who later died in police custody) as chairperson and the young Peter Mokaba as publicity secretary. At the same time Joyce was assisting SAAWU to organise the workers of Turfloop.

The repressive 80s

1985 was known as the “Year of the

Shambock” in Lebowa, northern Transvaal. Joyce was detained frequently during this year. On one day in April 1985 she was arrested three times, whilst participating in anti-repression protests in Pietersburg. As was the case elsewhere in the country, 1985 saw countless schools boycotts. The police seemed to blame Joyce for almost every one that occurred in the northern Transvaal. When a student meeting she was addressing at Turfloop was broken up by the police she was targeted and set upon by police dogs. She ended up with a broken arm and dog bites, and a charge of public violence against her. But worse was to come. By the end of 1985 Joyce’s house in Mankweng was being raided by the police weekly. And in April of the following year her home was attacked with hand grenades. Joyce was critically injured and bears the scars of the attack to this day.

After the attack on her home Joyce went into hiding – or rather, into disguise. She continued her activism dressed in traditional Venda garb and under the name of Mary Make. She concentrated her work in remote villages. But in October 1986 Joyce was detained again. It was to be three Christmases and a number of periods of solitary confinement later that she was finally released in January 1989. Joyce’s release came after a prolonged hunger strike and extensive international pressure – including from the Lutheran Church in Germany. (Joyce is herself an active member of the Lutheran church.) On her release, Joyce was slapped with a house arrest order which remained in place until the unbanning of the ANC a year later. The order prohibited her from entering any educational institutions – making it impossible for her to resume her employment at Turfloop. However, even after the order was lifted, the university administration remained reluctant to reinstate her. It took eight months to win the battle for reinstatement. Once reinstated, Joyce wasted no time in re-organising the workforce into the relatively newly established NEHAWU. By November the

workers were on strike in support of a wage increase. At the time many of the workers were earning less than R200 per month. From Turfloop Joyce organised other workplaces in the region into NEHAWU. In 1992 she was elected the union's national treasurer.

Education as the future

Joyce has an interest not only in the conditions of work and study in educational institutions, but also in the content of education. She was a founder member of the National Education Crisis Committee in 1986. In 1991 she was appointed the Education, Arts and Culture co-ordinator for the Northern Transvaal region of the ANC, and in 1992 she became the region's Education, Science and Technology co-ordinator. "I love the political side of education," she says, "and will definitely take an interest in it in parliament. However, my first interest will be in worker rights."

Human Rights abuses

Joyce's detention experiences led her to become active in the Detainee Parents Support Committee (DPSC) in the mid 80s. Her interest in human rights continues to manifest itself in her involvement as a Commissioner of the Human Rights Commission – as a monitor of repression. That will be another interest of hers in government. "We can't expect that the police force will change heart overnight. There will still be monitoring to do. The police will need to be cooked again, as their training was cock-eyed. There will even be those who will be unable to change, and who's records will show that they need to be thrown out."

The rural poor

As a regional representative to the National Assembly, Joyce sees her most important task as being to address the needs of the rural poor. "Poverty, ill health, and illiteracy are all



closely related," she argues. "A strong programme of Reconstruction is going to be required to redress these. Water is scarce, there is a lack of clinics, disease spreads easily ... And women are the worst victims – they suffer the brunt, and burn in the fire of poverty, poor health, and illiteracy. They become the victims of people who have their own agenda. For example, they get manipulated into making contributions for the drilling of a borehole, only to find that the water ends up only for the chief. So along with a reconstruction programme there will have to be

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powerful programmes of awareness and education, with women as the channel."

Joyce is under no illusion that the democratic election of a new parliament will solve South Africa's problems.

"Economically the country is not there, but with commitment we could get somewhere. And I will continue to rather die for my beliefs and for ultimate freedom." ☆

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