

Zora Mehlomakulu

Think back to 1972. There is no LRA. There is no protection against dismissal. There are (almost) no unions for African workers. African workers can be dismissed instantly for organising. The Western Cape is a 'coloured labour preference' area. The last organised African resistance was crushed in 1963.

Into this vacuum step a few white students, and the last frail remnants of the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) - and one tough lady called Zora Mehlomakulu.

Zora and the students

This is what happened.

A group of white students led by Jeanette Curtis (later Schoon) made contact with the SACTU underground through Elijah Loza. Unions were too dangerous. So they decided to form the Western Province Workers' Advice Bureau (WPWAB). Loza brought Zora Mehlomakulu to one of the meetings at the old Christian Institute. In 1963, as a young woman, she had been the last SACTU official in Cape Town before SACTU was forced to close down.

The WPWAB's tactics were breathtakingly simple. Pamphlets were handed out at railway stations and the students published a newspaper called *Abasebenzi*.

Workers came to the office - in the old Benbow Building in Athlone - with their grievances. 'Are you the only person with this problem?' they were asked. 'No, everyone has this problem,' they replied. 'I will come to your factory,' said Zora.

She took the bus - no kombi taxis in those days - and spoke to the workers outside the factory. She suggested they elect a committee. When 75% of the workers agreed to form a committee, it was formed.

Zora's work

Now in those days there were no unions for African workers. However, there was the Bantu Labour (Settlement of Disputes) Act of 1953. It provided for the election of workers' committees. So the WPWAB used it. It drove the bosses mad but it was the law!

Zora organised dozens of independent workers' committees throughout the Cape Peninsula. She was the first full-time organiser of African workers after ten years of darkness.

The next step for a workers' committee was to affiliate to the WPWAB. So by 1975, the WPWAB was a city-wide union in all but name. Zora organised factories like Nautilus, Gearings Foundry and Duens Bakery. Soon there were 40 organised factories.

In a few years, the WPWAB grew into the General Workers' Union and then into the Transport and General Workers' Union. And from the workers' committees sprang today's shopsteward movement. This was the work of Zora Mehlomakulu.

Zora, the Langa woman

She was one of those tough, independent-minded Langa women. She was not an intellectual. In meetings, while the young students hotly debated the issues of the day,

Zora would drop tolerantly off to sleep.

But her instincts were built on a rock - the rock of workers' rights. Many times 'our young baby' - that is what she called the growing organisation - was threatened by the security police. She never wavered. Many times there were political and strategic challenges. Her answer was always 'Workers first'. She had no time for any party line.

Zora was incorruptible. The security police offered her a car / a great thing for a black woman in 1973. She preferred to travel by bus.

She had a delightful sense of humour - she described a fellow organiser as 'a wheelbarrow' because he always had to be pushed. When some crackpot idea was proposed, she would screw up her face

and you knew exactly what she thought.

Zora never thought of herself. When she retired from the union, she did not become an industrial relations officer or a Member of Parliament. She started a training project for unemployed workers. Zora made the workers' cause her life.

Now she is dead - in tragic circumstances last month. She has gone to join her old comrade Elijah Loza, who died in police custody in 1977; her young fellow organiser Luke Story Mazwembe, who suffered the same fate; and Jeanette Curtis and her young daughter, who were assassinated in Angola.

These are the heroes and heroines of the workers' movement. ★

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Programme leader Professor Barney Erasmus