

LUCY BUYAPI MVUBELO: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF A FORMIDABLE SOUTH AFRICAN TRADE UNION LEADER, 1942-1959

Irene Strydom and Pieter Coetzer¹

Abstract

Lucy Mvubelo was perhaps the most formidable black South African female union leader. In this article the authors shed light upon the early role of Mvubelo (till 1959) in the country's trade union. After becoming a teacher she entered the ranks of the trade unions in 1942 and was soon noticed due to her leadership qualities and remarkable potential. She came to the fore during 1942 and 1956 and was instrumental in the early liberation struggle, the formation of the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) and the Federation of Free African Trade Unions of South Africa (FOFATUSA). This paved the way for her further involvement in the history of the South African trade unions up to 1987.

Keywords: Lucy Mvubelo; trade union workers; Garment Workers' Union of SA (GWUSA); women labourers and liberation; Federation of SA Women (FSAW); SA Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU); Federation of Free African Trade Unions, SA (FOFATUSA); resistance against apartheid.

1. INTRODUCTION

Lucy Buyaphi Mvubelo was born on 20 January 1920 in Spes Bona, Johannesburg. She was the oldest child of a family of four. Her family moved to this eastern township of Johannesburg in 1930.² Mvubelo's home country was Swaziland. She made annual visits to Swaziland to visit her family and a much loved cow that she had received from her cousin in exchange for an old bedroom suite.³ Her early education was at the Doornfontein School of the American Board of Missions.

It is true that there was not much indication during Mvubelo's early childhood years that her life would be extraordinary and that she would excel to become the leader of the biggest and most powerful trade union in South Africa. Most of her early years she spent growing up in a backyard in Jeppe where her mother was a domestic worker. Mvubelo's mother believed very strongly in the value of educa-

1 Irene Strydom is a lecturer at the Christian Academy, Swakopmund, Namibia. E-mail: strydom007@yahoo.com; Pieter Coetzer is a Research Fellow and Emeritus Professor, University of the Free State. E-mail: coetzer.pw@gmail.com.

2 *SA Panorama* 29(2), 3 March 1982.

3 L Polonsky, *The politician's cookbook: Conversations with 25 South African politicians – 161 of their favourite recipes* (Cape Town, 1982), p. 92.

tion and this is why she sent her daughter to attend the Inanda Seminary, a private girls' school in Natal. This Seminary was built in 1879 and is the oldest school for black girls in South Africa.⁴ Mvubelo attended the Seminary from 1935 to 1937, where she completed standard eight (grade ten). She could not matriculate, because her younger brother also had to have an opportunity to go to school and her parents being poor could not afford to keep her at school any longer.⁵

In those days teachers could begin teaching with only a primary school certificate. Mvubelo's working life started off as a teacher, but only for a short while when human frailties overtook her ambitious career plans and she gave herself in marriage. She was only 18 when she married McKenzie Mvubelo, also a teacher.⁶

Her husband lived in Alexandra township, and that was where Mvubelo moved to when she married. After she had lived in the township for 27 years, her permit to remain there was suddenly cancelled and so she had to move to Beverly Hills – Beverly Hills Soweto, that is.

Mvubelo had two children, a daughter, Cynthia, and a son, Victor. She was very proud of her offspring and extremely family-orientated.⁷ Her son was born in 1941, and after her children had been over the infancy stage, she was lured to take employment in the Transvaal clothing industry where remuneration for ordinary machinists was far above the earnings of an African teacher. "My friends told me that fabrics paid better than domestic work", Mvubelo said.⁸

2. TRADE UNION WORKER 1942-1956

The success story of this woman begins in 1942 when she joined a dress factory called London Model as a dressmaker. Black women were not then allowed to join the male union founded in 1919 because they were not pass bearers. Mvubelo's father, a labourer, had belonged to this union, the Industrial Commercial Workers' Union of Africans (ICU) organised by the charismatic and well-known leader Clements Kadalie, from what was then Nyasaland (now Malawi). It was the most influential union in the 1920s.⁹

During the Second World War (1939-1945) when all the white female workers were recruited by factories which produced ammunition and other war materials, there was a vacuum that had to be filled and that was filled by black and brown women. Mvubelo's trade union involvement dates back to 1942. "The starting point in my life", she said. "was when they sent me to the trade union to obtain a card. I

4 *SA Panorama* 29(2), 31 March 1982.

5 *Suid-Afrikaanse Oorsig*, 18 April 1980.

6 Bonnie Blamick (ed.), *Lucy Mvubelo: Munger Africana Library Notes*, January 1980, p. 3.

7 *Sunday Express*, 22 April 1984.

8 *SA Oorsig*, 18 April 1980.

9 *Sowetan*, 17 March 1992.

did not even know where it was.” Her sympathy with the workers’ struggle started on that day when she saw the long rows of workers.¹⁰

As a machinist in the garment industry she earned R2,25 a week. A dispute with the employer management caused a factory lock-out of workers. Mvubelo was initiated into the trade union movement. “That’s when I started to realise that with a union you fight an issue together. The essence is to organise all workers into one big movement to speak with one strong voice when they make demands.”¹¹

When Mvubelo joined the industry there were only ten black women but most unfortunately they could not even join the existing African union for men under the leadership of Ganna Makabeni. Neither could they become members of the GWUSA (Garment Workers’ Union of South Africa). But the GWU (Garment Workers’ Union) happened to look through the Industrial Conciliation Act and saw a flaw in the Act and they took the matter to the Supreme Court. The Union won and for the first time black women could become members of the GWU. They even received a back pay from the employers of the clothing industry because as non-members they did not qualify for a minimum wage.¹² This brought great joy to the African women garment workers and job opportunities for the African women of South Africa.

Fortunately in 1945 under the leadership of Solly Sachs,¹³ it was accepted that black women had to be represented in the management committee of the GWU. In 1945 Mvubelo was one of the first five black women who were elected to serve on the management committee, a position which she held every year until 1953 when the law was amended to exclude black workers from unions.

In 1948 the National Party (NP) won the South African election and Dr DF Malan became Prime Minister. The party started its policy of separate development (apartheid) and thus a very difficult period for trade unions began. Mvubelo was fearless and never hesitated to fight for better conditions for trade union workers in spite of the negative attitude of the apartheid government towards black South Africans.

The Garment Workers’ Union of South Africa immediately assisted the black women to organise a separate union. On 4 June 1953, the Garment Workers’ Union of African Women (GWU-AW) was formed and Mvubelo was chosen as the leader.

10 *Suid-Afrikaanse Oorsig*, 18 April 1980.

11 *Financial Mail*, 14 December 1979.

12 Archives of the Church of the Province of South Africa, William Cullen Library, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg (hereafter only referred to as AH 1092). AH 1092, 1.4.3.4, GWU Trade Union: NUCW. Correspondence and papers. Address by Ms Lucy Mvubelo, General Secretary of the NUCW(SA). Delivered to the convention of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union, Hotel Fountainbleau, Miami Beach, Florida, 9-14 May 1971, p. 2.

13 Sachs became the General Secretary of the Witwatersrand Tailor’s Association (WTA) in 1928. In 1952 Sachs was banned from South Africa and went to live in London.

She said she had much to learn. “First and foremost one had to learn to accept all people. You had to learn that when you have to organise your people you must also educate them to accept other people because they were not responsible for the law.” She said she meant that the workers in the industry were not responsible for bringing the people the law of separation, they just had to adhere to the law because it was the law of the country.¹⁴

As soon as the Native Labour Settlement of Disputes Act became law, some unscrupulous employers cut the wages of black female workers. Mvubelo’s new GWU-AW took the matter to court and won back pay for the women who had been affected.¹⁵ “We fought the reduction of our wages, which followed as a result of our exclusion from the non-racial union. We also fought the case of black men who earned less than women and did not enjoy medical aid and provident fund benefits, and that they be unionised and included in the Industrial Council Agreement. We won both cases”, she said. Her union was to continue fighting and winning many other court battles and opening doors where the government had closed them. In 1954, for instance, they established a welfare fund for unemployed blacks to be able to draw pensions. By this time in her life Mvubelo was inducted as a strong trade unionist and began her crusade of organising workers and fighting for their rights.¹⁶

In 1955 four members of the National Council of the Garment Workers’ Union walked out of a meeting of this council. They protested against a black woman’s presence at the council meeting, because they said that Mvubelo was not a member of the Garment Workers’ Union of South Africa. Anna Scheepers, as chairperson of the meeting, put Mvubelo’s presence at the meeting to a vote. Only four members of the East Rand Branch of the GWUSA voted for her to leave. All the other delegates, 14 brown delegates and 16 whites, voted for Mvubelo to stay. After the four people, Carel Meyer, Jannie Bosch, Mike van den Berg and Sophie Kruger had left, the people who stayed behind clapped their hands whilst shouting: “Now the meeting will go off smoothly!” At this meeting a unification of the Natal, Cape and Transvaal branches was discussed in order to have one Garment Worker’s Union for South Africa. Another request was that members support their leaders in “their battle against the government to prevent the robbing of their funds and profits”.¹⁷ This would not be the only time that Mvubelo was treated like an outcast at a meeting. At this occasion it was the right-wing supporters of the government’s apartheid ideology who staged the walk-out. At many other occasions, such as at

14 “Trade Unionism in South Africa: Revolution or peace?” Speech delivered by Lucy Mvubelo at the annual conference of the Centre for the Investigation into Revolutionary Activities, 1 October 1984: Aspirations of trade unions in South Africa, p. 20.

15 *The Star*, 5 November 1979.

16 *Sowetan*, 17 March 1992.

17 *Die Transvaler* 26 February 1955.

international conferences, delegates would not even listen to her speeches, because they wrongly saw her as a supporter of the South African government.

In 1956, while he was distributing leaflets for the Transport Workers Union (Transvaal), McKenzie Mvubelo, husband of Lucy Mvubelo, was viciously attacked. This obvious act of political vengeance left McKenzie for the next 22 years of his life in a sanatorium. This meant that Lucy Mvubelo had to raise her two children alone.¹⁸

She was, however, very determined that both her children had to have the best education possible. It is important to note that Mvubelo's son graduated from the then University of Zululand and her daughter became a qualified nurse with three diplomas.¹⁹ Mvubelo believed that the Africans' desire for the education of their families was growing with the awareness that job opportunities were becoming more abundant for the educated.²⁰ She said that community leaders had to motivate children to go to school. She rightly asked: "What is the worth of freedom without education?"²¹

3. THE LIBERATION STRUGGLE

The African National Congress Women's League (ANCWL) had for many years been organising women for the national liberation struggle. These women also performed a more traditional function, that of providing food and accommodation for ANC conferences and meetings.²² Mvubelo also took an active part in the defiance campaign organised by the ANC.²³ In the urban areas, a strong alliance was forged between racially oppressed groups and sympathetic whites. As a united front against apartheid the non-racial Congress Alliance (CA), formed in 1953 from previously organised racially-based and worker groups, defied unjust laws and conducted campaigns against forced removals under the Group Areas Act and against inferior "Bantu" education for African townships.²⁴ Perhaps the most significant congress campaign was the campaign against the pass laws, and in particular, the extension of reference books to African women.

18 "Organize or starve" <<http://www.liberation.org.za/orgs/sactu/organsta06.php>>

19 *SA Panorama*, 31 March 1982.

20 AH 1092, Cba 1.4.3.4 GWU Trade Union: NUCW. Correspondence and papers, p. 5.

21 *Sowetan*, 17 February 1986.

22 "Nine women play leading role" <<http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/congress/sactu/organsta09.html>>

23 *Rand Daily Mail*, 19 January 1981.

24 ES Schmidt, *African women's resistance to the pass laws in South Africa 1950-1960. Now you have touched the women*. From "Notes and Documents" <<http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/misc/schmi123html>>

The pass laws were described as the “African worker’s handcuffs”.²⁵ By controlling the movement of the African labour force, the white NP government prevented them from selling their labour freely. All Africans over the age of 16 were forced to carry these “passes” which proved that they were employed, that they had a permit to live in the city where they worked and that they had permits to seek work. Failure to produce these on demand rendered the African workers liable to arrest and conviction.²⁶

Passes for women were not introduced until the mid-1950s. When the announcement was made South African women launched a massive campaign against passes. Mvubelo told a reporter of the *Financial Mail*: “We want the same documents as whites – the Book of Life. I hate carrying a reference book. It makes me feel as if I’m very small in this country.”²⁷

It was not until 17 April 1954, when the Federation of South African Women (FSAW) was born, that women of all races united to carry on the struggle against racial and gender discrimination. At the founding conference, 146 women delegates representing 230 500 women from all over South Africa, gathered in Johannesburg “to discuss how to win freedom for all the people of South Africa”.²⁸ Mvubelo was one of the key organisers of the FSAW Conference in Johannesburg. The ANC Women’s League President at that time, Ida Mtwana, said: “Gone are the days when the place of women was in the kitchen and looking after the children. Today they are marching side by side with men on the road to freedom.”²⁹ The congress adopted the Women’s Charter and set up aims for the new organisation.

In September 1955 the potent issue of passes burst to the fore again with the announcement that government intended to start issuing women with reference books from January 1956.³⁰ Demonstrations flared up again and the women from the then Transvaal planned a demonstration in Pretoria.

For several weeks the demonstrations, deputations and meetings organised in protest were front page news in *The Guardian*. “We will not carry any passes: African women indignant”; “African women up in arms, mounting opposition to passes for women”; “Campaign against passes for women gathers force.” The protest spanned the country.

On 9 August 1956 women poured into Pretoria and Johannesburg. On this historical day some 2 000 women marched to the Union Buildings to present their protest to the Prime Minister, JG (Hans) Strijdom. Despite the tremendous

25 *Workers Unity*, May 1977.

26 “Nine women play a leading role” <<http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/congress/sactu/organsta09.html>>

27 *The Financial Mail*, 14 December 1979.

28 *Ibid.*

29 *ANC Women’s League 50 years of struggle*. <<http://www.anc.org.za/wl/docs/50years.html>>

30 *Garment Worker/Klerewerker*, 18 April 1975.

opposition, passes for women were introduced and, as predicted, brought increased suffering. However, this did not mean an end to women's protests as they continued to organise against the pass laws throughout South Africa.³¹

4. SACTU (SOUTH AFRICAN CONGRESS OF TRADE UNIONS)

For African workers in particular, the emergence of the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) in March 1955 represented a new thrust in the history of workers' struggles in South Africa. As one African trade unionist described it: "In the factory, the birth of SACTU was like rays of sunshine piercing through the dark." At the inaugural conference of SACTU, Mvubelo was elected as one of the two vice-presidents of the Executive Committee of SACTU. By clearly recognising the link between the struggle for economic gains and the general political struggle, the founders of SACTU were calling upon the workers of South Africa to fulfil their historic role – to become the spearhead in the struggle for national liberation.³²

Throughout the years, SACTU consistently recognised that women, and particularly African women, suffered an additional form of oppression and therefore had a distinct role to play in the political and trade union struggles in South Africa and had to make a commitment to build a South Africa free from oppression on the basis of race, class or gender.³³ SACTU declared that the interests of all workers were alike, whatever their race or creed. They resolved that SACTU, as a co-ordinating body of trade unions, would strive to unite all workers in its ranks without discrimination and without prejudice. They resolved that this body would determinedly seek to further and protect the interests of all workers.

The SA Trade Union Council (later TUCSA), on the other hand, accepted the government's apartheid division and embarked on a programme of excluding African trade unions from its ranks.³⁴ Anna Scheepers, the formidable President of the GWUSA and one of the leading figures in TUCSA, fought this excluding of African trade unions from TUCSA, but without success.

In November 1958 SACTU (Mvubelo's organisation where she served as Vice-President) appealed to SATUC (Scheepers's organisation) to join SACTU in a deputation to the Johannesburg Chambers of Commerce and the Federated Chambers of Industry, stating that the issue of passes to women was a violation of their rights as workers for freedom of movement and association, and of their right

31 "Nine women play a leading role" <<http://www.anc.org.za/ancdoc/history/congress/sactu/organsta09.html>>

32 "SACTU appears on the scene" <<http://www.liberation.org.za/org.sactu/organsta03.php>>

33 *Ibid.*

34 *Ibid.*

to sell their labour freely. SACTU received no reply from TUCSA³⁵ and believed that TUCSA had betrayed the workers.³⁶

Rejecting the slogan of “no politics in the trade union movement” (as TUCSA believed), SACTU leaders refused to divorce the struggle for political rights and power from the day-to-day struggle for higher wages and improved working conditions.³⁷

Mvubelo, however, always stated that she was totally against mixing trade union work with politics. She said that as trade unionist she concentrated on bread-and-butter issues, whilst politicians could give attention to national issues.³⁸ This view was in sharp contrast with that of SACTU. If one reads the following extract from the address of the Chairman of SACTU at the inaugural conference, the contrasting views of Mvubelo and SACTU will be clear: “You cannot separate politics and the way in which people are governed from their bread and butter, or their freedom to move to and from places where they can find the best employment or the houses they live in, or the type of education their children get. These things are of vital concern to the workers. The trade unions would therefore be neglecting the interests of their members if they failed to struggle for their members on all matters which affect them. The trade unions must be as active in the political field as they are in the economic sphere because the two hang together and cannot be isolated from each other.”³⁹

Even in its first year of existence, SACTU firmly allied itself with the other congresses and participated in the Congress of the People held in Kliptown, in June 1955, where the epoch-making Freedom Charter was adopted. This marked the beginning of a close relationship between SACTU and the liberation movement of the workers in South Africa.⁴⁰

Shortly after the inaugural conference, the issue of international affiliation was raised at the Second Management Committee meeting held on 13 April 1955. A motion was proposed by Lucy Mvubelo, and seconded by Cleopas Sibande (A-TWU) “that the South African Congress of Trade Unions should affiliate to the World Federation of Trade Unions, and that the Secretary should enquire about the affiliation fees”. The motion was passed and then referred to the first NEC meeting held in Johannesburg on 27 June 1955. The motion to affiliate to the WFTU was

35 The Trade Union Council of South Africa was formed in 1954. Originally, membership was limited to registered trade unions. This policy was changed at the congress in 1962, where it was decided to affiliate “properly constituted black trade unions”.

36 “Nine women play a leading role” <<http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/congress/sactu/organsta09.html>>

37 “SACTU appears on the scene” <<http://www.liberation.org.za/orgs/sactu/organsta03.php>>

38 *SA Panorama*, 31 March 1982.

39 OA Olsson, Minutes of the Inaugural Conference of SACTU, Trades Hall, Johannesburg, 5-6 March 1955. Address of the Chairperson at the Inaugural Conference.

40 “SACTU appears on the scene” <<http://www.liberation.org.za/orgs/sactu/organsta03.php>>

passed unanimously. For reasons of political security, the WFTU never regarded its association with SACTU as that of an official affiliation, and SACTU never actually paid affiliation fees.⁴¹

Although Mvubelo was the person who initially moved the affiliation to the WFTU in April 1955, she was the only SACTU Executive Member to break from SACTU and the congress alliance to join the reformist camp of SATUC-FOFATUSA (Federation of Free African Trade Unions). Mvubelo's break from SACTU did not surprise them. They viewed her as opportunistic and saw what she had done as a sell-out of the workers' struggle for total liberation. They believed that perhaps it was the lure of a privileged position, or the knowledge that she was not capable of enduring the wrath of the regime's inevitable repression of SACTU, that caused her to break with SACTU. Whatever reason, only a short time passed before Mvubelo was exempted from the Minister of Labour's prohibition on African trade unionists travelling abroad to international conferences.⁴²

In 1958 Mvubelo and her union, the GWU-AW (Garment Workers' Union of African Women) and 18 other unions withdrew from SACTU. "It (SACTU) became the ally of the ANC", Mvubelo said. "We didn't want to become involved in politics."⁴³ These conflicts left the African workers in the industry hopelessly divided. Much criticism against Mvubelo centred around her association with TUCSA, an organisation which in the 1950s, according to one veteran trade unionist, supported influx control because, they argued, it gave the workers who were already in industry more protection.⁴⁴

5. FOFATUSA (FEDERATION OF FREE AFRICAN TRADE UNIONS, SOUTH AFRICA)

In October 1959 nine African unions established FOFATUSA (Federation of Free African Trade Unions of SA), because SACTU was not expressing their economic views and they did not want to become involved in party politics. FOFATUSA was free to express its opinion anywhere, because it accepted all workers irrespective of colour, creed or political affiliations.⁴⁵

Both the ANC and PAC were committed to anti-pass campaigns in 1960, reflecting the mounting anger on this issue among the African people. FOFATUSA

41 "SACTU on the international front" <<http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/congress/sactu/organsta11.html>>

42 *Ibid.*

43 *Rand Daily Mail*, 19 January 1981.

44 *Ibid.*

45 AH 1092, GWU/NUCW. Correspondence and papers. Extracts from Report of Secretariat submitted to the Seventh World Congress—International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, Berlin, 1962, p. 7.

had its ups and downs and received a set-back owing to the emergency declared after the Sharpeville massacre of that year.⁴⁶

FOFATUSA, during its brief existence, not only catered for the members of its affiliated unions but also assisted unorganised workers, the majority of whom were unskilled workers and labourers, to obtain improved working conditions. FOFATUSA submitted memoranda to the Wage Board and gave oral evidence at the public sittings. Representations were also made to the Wage Board when investigating industrial councils where in existence but failed to legislate for the under-privileged African workers.⁴⁷

FOFATUSA was the only co-ordinating body in the Republic which became affiliated to the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU). The latter also made it possible for representatives of FOFATUSA to attend the annual conferences of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the triennial congress of the ICFTU. Mvubelo, as President of FOFATUSA and General Secretary of the National Union of Clothing Workers (SA), was present at these international conferences on two occasions and also served on the panel of consultants on problems of female workers of the ICTFU. Though the possibilities for trade union action on the part of African workers were severely restricted in South Africa a certain amount could nonetheless be achieved. The ICFTU contributed towards the Treason Trials Defence Fund, and to the South African Defence and Aid Fund in a fairly substantial manner, a fund which was looking after the needs of the victims of oppressive measures, including trade unionists.⁴⁸

Mvubelo said that FOFATUSA's relations with the South African Trade Union Council (SATUC) remained cordial. On the other hand the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) was showing an increased attitude of hostility towards the ICFTU and spread completely false accusations about the ICFTU and its activities. SACTU also appeared to maintain ever closer relations with the WFTU. Mvubelo added that on several occasions of blatantly repressive measures against its officers, SACTU appealed for ICFTU's help. Whenever the case merited it, ICFTU protested against such measures.⁴⁹ SACTU desired (at first) to co-operate with both international federations (CFTU and WFTU) in creating united actions against apartheid.

“Because of the confused political situation in South Africa a trade union movement was always aligned with any political move that was embarked upon by outright political parties – hence our difficulty in expressing our views as trade unionists”, Mvubelo said. She continued by saying: “Our stand must be of an independent nature, free from party politics, free to criticise and express the views of the international working class at all times. Of

46 *Garment Worker/Klerewerker*, 18 March 1966.

47 *Ibid.*

48 AH 1092, GWU/NUCW. Correspondence and papers. Extracts from the report of the International Secretariat submitted to the Seventh World Congress of ICFTU, Berlin, 1962.

49 *Ibid.*

late we have noticed blocs and powers in Africa trying to force their place into labour councils, and because of the uncommitted line pursued by the ICFTU and its affiliates we have remained aloof and succeeded in influencing either parties to listen to our advice and warnings without prejudice. ... Let us therefore strive to achieve our goal to fight for the betterment of all workers irrespective of colour, race or creed.”⁵⁰

Lucy Mvubelo explained that FOFATUSA was formed after the South African government had decided to divide workers according to its programme of separate development (“apartheid”). Faced with this dilemma, the African workers immediately decided to close the loophole so as to be in conformity with the law. “Not that we appreciated the division but because we felt the need to keep outcasts fully intact; the other registered groups continued to enjoy statutory rights, but in close co-operation with us”, Mvubelo replied.⁵¹ She said legislation prevented white and black workers from working together harmoniously although morally their claims, demands and grievances were one.

At this stage SACTU attacked FOFATUSA’s alignment with the ICFTU and accused Mvubelo of being pro-government. Mvubelo responded that SACTU failed to understand that “we are not a political organisation and our membership is open to all groups irrespective of political affiliations”.⁵² She explained that the ICFTU was the only organisation that expressed their (FOFATUSA’s) point of view and aspirations. FOFATUSA could not lose sight of its goal by supporting a foreign undemocratic society, namely the communist bloc. According to the last WFTU congress, it had become evident that “the workers of the world will be swept into a state of confusion by the well-planned strategy set up by the WFTU”. She added that in South Africa the confusion had become noticeably evident.⁵³

Moverover: “Economically the right of all workers had to be safeguarded – hence workers and workers’ unions’ views had to be openly stated whether such views hurt or please the governments of the day. Everywhere there exists a working class organisation to protect the interests of the workers at all costs. Naturally opponents will hold a trade union organisation to be political if it expresses its views on a particular situation but forgetting that the people engaged in such a struggle are workers and a workers’ organisation should and must protect and protest against any injustice meted out to the said society. We therefore sympathise with those who have continually fought for their rights economically and encourage individual members to embark on any constitutional means deemed fit and necessary to lead them to a better life with their families.”⁵⁴

50 *Ibid.*

51 *Ibid.*

52 *Ibid.*

53 *Ibid.*

54 *Ibid.*

At the seventh congress of the ICFTU Mvubelo made some suggestions and requests with regard to labour activities and programmes:

- Abolition of labour books. She told the President of the ICFTU that in South Africa Africans had to carry pass books or reference books as they were termed, and in these passbooks were clauses which limited a worker so that he could not move freely and live and work where he chose to do so. It was due to the Colour Bar Law in the past that an African had to carry a passbook. Mvubelo requested the ICFTU to assist black workers to fight the Colour Bar Law and the passes for African people.
- Mvubelo also asked the ICFTU's assistance to form close bonds with other internationals that adhered to their democratic way of approach.
- She further requested the ICFTU to help her union to develop dynamic programmes to emancipate the underprivileged worker;
- and to send lecturers of international repute to rotate in various centres, particularly in Southern Africa;
- that the ICFTU make compulsory donations to the ISFC annually, monthly or whatever the case might be; and
- that ICFTU help workers to make propaganda against the forces of totalitarianism.
- Finally Mvubelo requested constant consultation between different governments and the ICFTU.⁵⁵

SACTU had always clashed with TUC (after 1962 TUCSA), FOFATUSA and the ICFTU. When TUCSA, in 1962, for the first time since its creation in 1954, dropped its official colour bar and offered equality in affiliation status to African trade unions, no one could deny the progressive nature of this move, although the motivation behind it was questioned by observers at the time.⁵⁶

Although African trade unions failed to rush to TUCSA's "open door", the non-racial constitution once again forced SACTU to come to terms with TUCSA's role in the trade union movement. SACTU recounted the "imperialist connections" of TUCSA (referring to its ICFTU ties) and strongly argued against unity with TUCSA at any cost. "We wanted the unity of workers on realistic terms – not on

55 *Ibid.*

56 "Ruling class response" <<http://www.liberation.org.za/org/sactu/organsta04.php>> The SATUC's exclusion of African trade unions was beginning to be an embarrassment internationally. Lacking even the façade of liberalism, the TUC regarded FOFATUSA as its "official liaison" with African trade unions. It was this pressure from abroad, more so than a serious commitment to African workers, that led the TUC to drop its "colour bar" in the early 1960s. The name of the body changed at that time to the Trade Union Council of South Africa (TUCSA).

terms which would reduce the workers to impotency as had been done with workers in unions affiliated to TUC.” There was also no evidence that TUCSA had modified its anti-SATUC stance.⁵⁷ TUCSA’s hostility to SATUC came from two sources, firstly the average TUCSA white rank-and-file workers who chose to cling to the relative privilege they received under apartheid rather than promote solidarity of labour. Secondly, the TUCSA leadership strongly objected to the political trade unionism that SACTU projected.

It was said that the TUC (SATUC) approached African unions like Mvubelo’s National Union of Clothing Workers of South Africa (NUCW-SA)⁵⁸ and paternalistically offered to use its resources and energies to assist those unions to gain strength and efficiency. No wonder that Mvubelo was seen by SACTU as a renegade African unionist because she had broken ties with SACTU in 1957.⁵⁹ By being able to claim African “membership” would improve TUC’s international image. SACTU saw this as the underlying reason why TUC wanted FOFATUSA to join its ranks.⁶⁰ FOFATUSA was seen by SACTU as “not indigenous but rather an artificial transplant, alien to black working class solidarity”. In January 1966, at a well-attended general meeting of FOFATUSA, Mvubelo and a small number of delegates, representing the 13 affiliated unions, unanimously decided to dissolve FOFATUSA.⁶¹

FOFATUSA decided to recommend to its unions to link up with TUCSA. In an official statement, Mvubelo of FOFATUSA said it was not connected to any political organisation, and devoted its efforts exclusively to the betterment of African workers. It stated specifically that FOFATUSA had no connection with the banned PAC, ANC or with SACTU. FOFATUSA said it co-operated with TUCSA, “numerically the strongest and most representative trade unions federation in SA ... a non-racial body embracing workers of all races”.⁶²

It is important to note at this stage that after the 1960 demonstrations against the pass system and the bloodshed in both Sharpeville and Langa, the PAC and the ANC were declared “unlawful organisations, a serious threat to public safety”.⁶³ Since that time, blacks have not been allowed membership in any openly national political organisation in South Africa. Since SACTU worked very closely with the ANC, their leaders were frequently prohibited from travelling to international conferences, All-African People’s Conferences, International Labour Organisation Conferences, ICFTU Conferences and WFTU Conferences. Leslie Massina, the

57 *Ibid.*

58 NUCW-SA was established in 1962.

59 “Ruling class response” <<http://www.liberation.org.za/orgs/sactu/organsta04.php>>

60 *Ibid.*

61 *Garment Worker/Klerewerker*, 18 March 1966.

62 *The Star*, undated, ca. 1960.

63 Blamick, p. 8.

first General Secretary of SACTU, however escaped these early banning orders and managed to attend international trade union meetings in Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary and Rumania. Back in South Africa, he said: “South Africa has the iron curtain. We restrict entry and declare individuals prohibited immigrants.” Two years later, Massina was to be among the first SACTU-NEC (executive) members to be banned from trade union activity.⁶⁴

SACTU’s primary goal between 1955 and 1963 was to object to the total exclusion of African trade unions and co-ordinating bodies from representation on South African delegations to the International Labour Organisation (ILO) conferences. Successive apartheid regimes refused to even consider the selection of a SACTU representative to the ILO. In other words, the majority of the South African working class could never present its case directly to the ILO. As Moses Mabhida pointed out: “The White trade unionists make the world believe that an African is a bit of an imbecile, and as such, not capable of representing the opinions of his people or the African working class. This had to be proven wrong, and South Africa exposed for what she was.”⁶⁵

In 1959 Mvubelo was appointed through the support of the 53 million strong ICFTU (International Confederation of Free Trade Unions), to represent South African women on a consultative panel of labour experts on the problems of working women and young girls.⁶⁶ Government officials in Pretoria were against her leaving the country. They considered it “bad” for South Africa to have a black trade unionist at this world forum in Geneva.⁶⁷

The Minister of Labour, BJ (Ben) Schoeman, attempted to articulate the logic of apartheid on the question of the prevention of travelling freely to international conferences abroad: “I think it is unfair to the Non-European himself to allow him to go overseas, especially in a country where there is no colour bar and no discrimination, to attend a conference there and then have him come back to our conditions here ... While there is a Nationalist Government, I don’t think that will be permitted.”⁶⁸

The South African Nationalist Government, however, relented because South Africa was a member of the International Labour Organisation. Labour officials stated that blacks should not be barred from attending conferences in Geneva. The Department of the Interior, which had always controlled the movement of South

64 SACTU on the International Front <<http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/congress/sactu/organsta11.htm>>

65 *Ibid.* Wilton Mkwayi and Moses Mabhida were SACTU’s overseas representatives following their escape from South Africa during the State of Emergency in 1960. Mkwayi re-entered South Africa at a later date and was imprisoned to serve a life sentence at Robben Island.

66 *Rand Daily Mail*, 10 October 1959.

67 *Ibid.*

68 SACTU on the International Front <<http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/congress/sactu/organista11.html>>

Africans outside of the Union, was forced to give Mvubelo a passport. Although she had formally applied to the department for a passport in May 1959, more than six months before she needed to go to Geneva, it was only granted four days before she was due to leave. This was a historical moment because it was the first time South Africa was represented by a black official at an international labour conference.⁶⁹ Mvubelo proudly said that it was a memorable occasion. “I represented all the working women of South Africa.”⁷⁰ The fact that Mvubelo received a passport whilst other union leaders were refused passports, made many people think that she was pro-government. No wonder that Mvubelo was a sell-out to some and a saviour to others, a trade union moderate to certain people, but a government stooge and Aunty Tom to others.⁷¹

In a letter from Johanna Cornelius, the General Secretary of the GWUSA, to Lucy Mvubelo in Geneva, Switzerland, it is quite clear that Cornelius was very proud of Mvubelo and happy for her sake that she had been chosen to represent the workers of Africa in Geneva. Cornelius told her to use every opportunity to learn as much as possible about the trade union movement and to gather particular information in regard to automation, piecework, bonus schemes and out-work. She also warned Mvubelo not to use overseas platforms to make propaganda either for or against South Africa. Cornelius told her to make sure that everything she said was factual and verifiable because South Africans were often reported incorrectly which could hamper their chances of going overseas at a later date. Cornelius stated that she gave this advice as a friend who wanted to help and not criticise.⁷²

Cornelius also warned Mvubelo about a certain Mr Oliver Tamsen who tried to work up a government feeling against her.⁷³ From Cornelius’s letter quoted above, several assumptions could be made. From the rest of the letter, not quoted here, it is obvious to the reader that there had to be a good relationship between Mvubelo and Cornelius. Cornelius also told Mvubelo that everybody in the office was looking keenly forward to every letter she wrote from Switzerland. There was clearly transparency and trust between Cornelius and Mvubelo, because Cornelius said that she realised that Mvubelo could not write to everyone at the office of the GWU individually, therefore she had arranged to allow everybody to read each others letters.

69 *Ibid.*

70 *Suid-Afrikaanse Oorsig*, 18 April 1980.

71 *Sunday Express*, 22 April 1984.

72 AH 1092, Cba 1.4.1, GWU organisation in the clothing industry. NUCW 1953-1962. GWU of African Women. Letter from Johanna Cornelius (General Secretary of GWUSA)–Lucy Mvubelo at International Conference in Geneva, 14 October 1959.

73 *Rand Daily Mail*, 10 October 1959.

6. CONCLUSION

At this stage (1959) Lucy Mvubelo was only 39 years old. Although young, this former teacher was already a highly regarded trade union leader to whom many trade union leaders looked up. This was not easy in those years because of people's prejudice against women and because of the apartheid policy which started in 1948. In spite of the implementation of apartheid Mvubelo never actively entered politics and her main attention was focused on trade unions. National politics should be left to politicians, she believed. In spite of this she never hesitated to criticise racial prejudice and the apartheid government's policy and their leaders. Some of the black leaders and workers acted negatively towards her due to her attitude towards politics and disinvestment. She expressed the belief that her main focus was on the improvement of the conditions of trade union workers and not politics.

Old established leaders like Johanna Cornelius (General Secretary of the GWU) and Anna Scheepers (President of the GWU) regarded her as a formidable trade union leader. They never doubted her ability and readily invested in her with advice and training because of her enormous potential. The dignity of all races was important to Mvubelo. In her own words: "Remember then, be you black, white or yellow, one thing is in common: we are all workers with one common interest, that is, higher wages, a better life and to enjoy the best that life offers us."⁷⁴ Her main aim was to uphold a strong trade union organisation, to combat poverty, to save the workers and humanity from artificial distinction and to improve working conditions.⁷⁵

Mvubelo kept focusing on trade union activities during 1970 to 1974. She continued canvassing for support for the workers nationally and internationally, also fighting disinvestment from 1975-1980, while from 1981 to 1987 she fought for the staple food of survival – bread and butter issues – in the country she loved dearly on behalf of the trade union workers of South Africa. Her self-service, dogged by police and arrested for illegally organising workers, her initiatives and contributions were instrumental in bringing about phenomenal change in the black trade union movements.⁷⁶

74 AH 1092. Cba. 1.4.3, GWU Trade Union of Clothing Workers. Correspondence and papers. Address by Lucy Mvubelo. Extracts from Report of International Secretariat submitted to the Seventh World Congress – International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, Berlin, 1962. Vide pp. 373-377. Report of Congress.

75 *Ibid.*

76 Cf. Irene Strydom, *Labouring for a better life: the struggle of Anna Scheepers and Lucy Mvubelo for better labour conditions, 1960-1980*, MA, Department of History, UFS, 2007. In a follow-up article the authors aim to focus on the role of Mvubelo in the South African Trade Unions from 1959 onwards.