



## The Role of Women in the South African Trade Union Movement

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## NOTES AND DOCUMENTS\*

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April 1980

#### THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN TRADE UNION MOVEMENT

by

Shirene Fradet Carim

South African Congress of Trade Unions

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### CONTENTS

Page

Introduction	1	
How industrialization affected the position of women		1
The textile industry	2	
The formation of the South African Council of Trade Unions (SACTU)	6	
Anartheid laws and the African woman		7
New attempts to shackle trade unions	9	
Prominent women in the South African union movement		11
(a) Elizabeth Mafekeng	11	
(b) Viola Hashe	13	
(c) Ray Alexander	14	

#### Introduction

The history of the South African trade union movement is one which testifies to a remarkably high rate of involvement and militancy by the black and white female workforce. Whereas white working-class women of South Africa, like European and counterparts elsewhere are oppressed as workers and as women, the black women - and African women in particular - are oppressed as workers, as women and as blacks. While white, predominantly Afrikaner, working-class women struggled, from the 1920s to the 1940s out of condition of acute poverty, to reach lives of comfort and happiness in a prosperous country which they helped to build, African women are today still struggling in the face of falling wages and the rising legislative stranglehold and all other repressive means by which the Nationalist Government has been able to control the lives of the oppressed people of South Africa.

Militant unions have always existed in South Africa. Women workers

are centred mainly in the food processing, clothing and textile industries. However, the majority of African women are employed in agriculture and domestic service. According to the 1970 census figures, of the 1,889,00 African women employed in South Africa, only 70,000 worked in industry. However, this number is rising rapidly. In the manufacturing industry, one out of every five workers is a woman. In 1970, out of 214,000 women workers in industry, there were 58,000 white, 72,000 Coloured, 13,000 Indian and 70,000 African women. Most of the black women do manual work and face worse conditions than their male counterparts. For example, in the textile industry, women get one-fifth less than the minimum wage. In the Transvaal, a qualified male sewing-machinist gets R27,50 per week; a qualified woman machinist gets R22 per week. It is within these very industries where women are in the majority, that a history of militant trade unionism lives on.

Before describing the trade-union activities of women, let us look briefly at the status women enjoyed in traditional African society. Some would maintain that women were always oppressed because they attended to children, cooked, kept the house while men hunted or prepared for war. Women's work was, however, not regarded as less important than men's. While men fought wars to protect their land and cattle; drilled young boys in the art of warfare; hunted to feed the community, the women attended to crops, made utensils in which to cook and preserve food, and in the process handed on these skills to the next generation. It happened sometimes that men would return empty handed; on such occasions, food grown and preserved by women became vital for survival. Women were historians, handing down oral history. They were scientists, experimenting with herbs and plants, to make compounds which could cure anything from headaches to hepatitis. They were engineers and architects, building roads and irrigation canals for the community. In other words, the role of the woman was as important as that of the man and recognized as such.

How industrialization affected the position of women

Sex discrimination was first experienced by African women as a direct result of the class system which came about as a result of the seizure of land

from the African people and the beginning of industrialization. With no land to till, and their cattle plundered, men were forced to seek work on farms and later in the mines and cities, many leaving their wives and children in rural areas. The few pieces of land which supplemented meagre earnings in urban areas are virtually barren today. With only 13 per cent of the land to live on, inevitably women were ultimately forced to look for work in urban areas. As industry developed in the 1930s and 1940s, many women were drawn onto manufacturing plants. This phase of development gave rise to the growth of a large working class which included women. Working women proved that they could unite and organize themselves for the purpose of improving their working conditions in industry. Nor did the likelihood of being branded "Communist" stop them.

The textile industry

The textile industry illustrates the organizational development and

strength of women in the factories. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, when the clothing industry was being consolidated, its workforce was made up primarily of Afrikaner women. From the end of the Anglo-Boer war until secondary industries took off the ground, there was high unemployment among uneducated, Afrikaans-speaking "poor whites," which was primarily a consequence of the economic devastation of the rural areas during the war. The following account, by Hester Cornelius, a leader of the Garment Workers' Union, speaks for itself:

"In 1930, at the age of 22, I came to Johannesburg to look for work. I worked for one year as a table-hand in a clothing factory, and was later dismissed. In 1931, I tried to find another job without success - there were

hundreds of girls looking for jobs. I returned to the farm and became an ardent Nationalist, believing that the South African Party was to blame for our poverty and unemployment. Later, I returned to Johannesburg and found work

...with the two Vogel sisters. Although I was a fast worker, I was paid only 17 shillings and six pence per week and there was a lot of slack time in the industry.

"I began to fight for my rights and the rights of my fellow workers almost immediately. I started work in a factory. The girls in the factory would come to me with all their complaints and I would take them up with the employer. As I was a good worker, I was confident he would not sack me. Then I

heard about the Garment Workers' Union and, one lunch time, we went to the union office. Mr. Sachs, the secretary of the union, took down all our complaints, and I felt straightaway that we could rely upon the union to help. The more I saw of the union activities, the more I realized how necessary it was for the workers to become organized.

"At first I could not understand why Mr. Sachs, who was a Jew, fought so hard for the Afrikaner daughters. I spoke to many Nationalists about this very good Jew, who was doing so much to help us. They attacked him bitterly and this made me

lose faith in the Nationalist Party. In 1934, I was elected, as member of the executive committee of the union and learnt much more about trade unionism and about Mr. Sachs. I saw how angry he used to be when employers treated workers badly, and how hard he worked to improve our conditions. I also learnt that Mr. Sachs fought not only for garment workers, but for all the workers. It took a Jew to make me understand that poverty could be wiped out in sunny South Africa and that, if the workers were organized and united, they could gain higher wages and a better life.

"In 1932, my sister Johanna was arrested in Germiston whilst

taking an active part in the general strike in the clothing industry. My parents came for a few days and I took them to my uncle's family, who were disgusted with Johanna. One of them asked my father what he thought of his daughter going to jail.

My father smiled and said she was a 'chip of the old block'.

"The first strike in which I took a leading part was in 1936, in Cape Town. The garment workers of Cape Town were even worse exploited than we were in the Transvaal. Our union had sent delegates to Cape Town to organize the workers, and I was one of them. The workers came out on strike in several factories and I was arrested together with about 20 others. The workers lost the strike and, even today, they are paid much lower wages than the workers in the Transvaal. Over the years, I took part in numerous strikes of garment workers on the Rand and in Port Elizabeth. In 1942, I helped the Johannesburg sweet workers in their strike for higher wages, and was again arrested together with Anna Scheepers and Dulcie Hartwell.

"Over 20 years have passed since I started work in the clothing industry and, during that period, there has been a complete change in our wages, conditions of work and way of life. It was the union with its courageous, able leaders, which set us free from the hell of starvation wages and slum squalor, and no one else. The Nationalists, the so-called friends of the Afrikaner workers, have never helped us. On the contrary, they have always tried to break our union."

Scores of Afrikaner women, like Hester Cornelius, came to the fore in the '30s and '40s as leaders of the workers in the clothing industry. These included Anna Scheepers, President of the union, Johanna Cornelius, who took over as general secretary when Sally Sachs was banned, Katie Viljoen, Anna Swanepoel, and many more who helped build a solidarity among workers, across racial lines, challenging the theory held by the Nationalists, and even by other white trade unionists, that the influx of blacks into industry and their advancement in skill and efficiency would lead to a decline in the standards of living of the white worker and to replacement by blacks. They demonstrated how solidarity among workers gave the strength they needed to achieve their aims.

According to a report published in January 1954, the labour force in the

clothing industry in South Africa during the period 1938 to 1952 grew as follows:

Table 1

White males	White females	Coloured and Indian males	Coloured and Indian females
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8 896	1 509	3 441	1 228
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192

1 503	10 406	4 850	17 953	3 214	2 497
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This shows a rise, among white workers at that time, from 9,881 to 11,909, while among black workers, the rise was from 6,269 to 28,574. Overall, the percentage

of white garment workers fell from 61.2 per cent in the period 1937-38 to 29.4 per cent in 1952 while the percentage of black garment workers rose from 38.8 per cent to 70.6 per cent.

The following figures show the advancement in wages made by the workers in the clothing industry between 1941 and 1947. It also shows that towards the end of that decade, black male workers had attained positions of skilled labour, and were earning more than white women, even though they had started out as unskilled labour. The figures also show the discrepancy in wages along colour and sex lines.

Table 2

Average weekly wages, Transvaal (excluding Germiston)

1941

1942.

1943

1945

194.6

1947

White males White females Black males (excluding Africans) Black females

£ s. d. £ s. d.

6 10 11 80 8 9 2 6 10 11 10 84 11 20

215 7 35 6

2 0 4 4 41 210

,2 . 10 2 10 10

317 4 1 8 8 4 18 4 5 2 0

6 79 7 69 760 3 78 3 83 401

Sourcet E. S. Sachs, *Rebels Daughters*, H. C. Gibbon and Kee, 1957.

1937-38

-5

Taking into account tables 1 and 2, it can be seen that there was a trend towards underpayment on grounds of sex rather than colour, and for this reason a preference was, and still is, given to employing women in labour intensive industries. Throughout this period a large section of white workers who used racial discrimination as a short-cut to better working conditions and prosperity, fought militantly against the employment of black workers in skilled jobs. The 1922 strikes are clear testimony of this. Political parties and industrialists used this division as further grounds for discriminating against another section of the workforce, thereby underpaying on grounds of both sex and colour.

African males were not included in wage agreements reached by industrial councils, as they were regarded as "non-employees." In 1924, when the first Industrial Conciliation Act was passed to regulate the relationship, between employers and employees and to provide a measure of collective bargaining for workers, Africans were excluded. Obvious racialism in the Act might have evoked criticism from abroad, so a new definition of "employee" was introduced, which reads:

"'employee' means any person employed by, or working for, an

employer, and receiving, or being entitled to receive, any remuneration, and any person whatsoever who in any manner assists in the carrying on or conducting of the business of an employer, but does

not include a person whose contract of service or labour is regulated by Act No 40 of 1894 of Natal, or, in terms of section two of the Plasters and Servants Law (Transvaal and Natal Amendment Act, 1926 (Act No 26 of 1926) is regarded for the purpose of Act No 40 of 1894 of Natal as a contract between master and servant, or is regulated by the Native Labour Regulation Act 1911 (Act No 15 of 1911) or by the Natives (Urban Areas) Act 1923 (Act No 21 of 1923), or by any amendment of, or any regulation made under, any of those laws: end 'employed' and 'employment' have corresponding meanings."

In other words, an African worker who had by law to carry a pass - and this meant all males of 16 and over - was not entitled to being included in any benefits and agreements reached through industrial negotiation. Under the Industrial Conciliation Act, Africans were not allowed to become members of registered trade unions. Since 1928, however, African clothing workers had been organized into a separate unregistered union, known as the South African Clothing Workers' Union, under the leadership of Gena Mlakabeni. African workers were greatly assisted in their union work by the executive committee of the Garment Workers' Union which often made representation to employers on their behalf and threatened strike action in solidarity with them. Since 1932, wages and other conditions of employment of African workers have been governed by wage determinations. The minimum stipulated was much lower than that provided in industrial agreements for similar work; more weekly hours of work --and less pay for holidays. Although African women did not fall under the definition of a pass-bearer for many years, in practice they were excluded from industrial negotiations.

From 1940 onwards, when secondary industries expanded rapidly, there was an acute shortage of labour. African women in urban areas, who had worked solely as domestic servants, now took employment in factories. This was less restric-

tive on their freedom, and they earned more pay. (Domestic workers have always been one of the most difficult sectors to organize into unions due to physical isolation and limited free-time.) By 1944, over one thousand African women were employed in the clothing industry in the Transvaal alone. Knowing that they were "employees" as defined by law, these women, represented by Christina Okolo, applied to the Transvaal Provincial Division of the Supreme Court for a declaratory order, asking the court to rule that she and all other African women were employees under the provisions of the Industrial Conciliation Act. The women had the full support of the executive committee of the Garment Workers' Union, who forced the Industrial Council to seek the Supreme Court ruling. On 22 December 1944, judgement was given, holding that Act 21 of 1925 and Act 15 of 1911 did not apply to "native females." This was a victory for African women workers who, in the course of a few weeks, had their wages increased by a substantial amount. Their hours of work were reduced from 46 to 44 hours per

week, as was provided in the agreement covering white, Coloured and Indian workers. All the other improved conditions of the agreement were extended to them as well. Shortly thereafter, African women clothing workers were enrolled as members of the Garment Workers' Union. United across racial lines, Afrikaner, Coloured and Indian women had shown solidarity with their African sisters to win a victory against the repressive State. African men started at a weekly wage of £1 for a 46-hour week, rising by yearly increases to £3 after five years. Now their wives, daughters and sisters received £2.5 shillings per week for a 44-hour week to start which rose by quarterly increases to £4.12 shillings per week after two and a half years. In addition, women were entitled to four weeks' paid holidays per year, as opposed to two weeks for African men. The victory also brought African women within the scope of the Unemployment Benefit Act, which had a definition of "employee" similar to the definition in the Industrial Conciliation Act. The formation of the South African Council of Trade Unions (SACTU) The advantage that African women had over their men by way of better wages and working conditions did not last long. In 1953 the Bantu Labour (Settlement of Disputes) Act was introduced, and African women workers were no longer permitted as members of a registered union. As happened in other sectors of industry, a separate union for African women was immediately formed. The union in the clothing sector was led by Lucy Mvubelo, who later became general secretary of the National Union of Clothing Workers, an amalgamation of the African men's and women's unions.

The South African Trades and Labour Council (SATLC) dissolved in October 1954, to form the colour-bar co-ordinating body, the South Africa Trade Union Council (later to be known as TUCSA). The TUCSA constitution excluded African trade unions and workers from affiliation and thus necessitated the formation of a new body that would not compromise the basic principles of trade unionism. The Transvaal Council of Non-European Trade Unions and progressive members in the SATLC met and pledged to create a new body that would be open to all workers irrespective of race or colour. This new body, SACTU, not only called for non-racial trade unionism, but also committed itself and its affiliated unions and workers to struggle on both economic and political fronts against all forms of oppression and exploitation. The

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pressures of political repression proved too much for some trade union leaders. Some African unions preferred to stay in the TUCSA which accepted African unions only as "parallel" unions which were lower in status than white unions in the same industry and did nothing to organize unorganized African workers. SACTU, because of its principled stand faced continuous political pressures. An example of this was the 1959 strike of the African Food and Canning Workers' Union, led by Elizabeth Mafeking. In September 1959 the State declared the food and canning industry an "essential" industry, which meant that strikes were prohibited. Elizabeth Mafeking was served with a banishment order after which she fled to Lesotho. Simultaneously, the period of the agreement between the Food and Canning Workers' Union (affiliated to SACTU) and the

Langeberg Kooperasie Beperk came to an end, and the company decided to reduce wages by at least eight shillings for the majority of workers. On 7 December, the workers went out on strike to protest against the reduction in wages despite the prohibition of strikes in the industry. The company reinstated agreement rates in February after a protracted struggle.

Apartheid laws and the African woman

More devastating to the African woman are laws which ensure the maintenance of the migrant labour system. Robbed of their productive lands, burdened with numerous taxes, African men have been forced to sell their labour on farms, in mines and in factories of "white" South Africa; while their wives and children, regarded by law as "superfluous appendages," are forced to remain in the barren and desolate bantustans. Men and women who live in cities are illegal immigrants in their own country - "labour units" to be defined as productive or non-productive. Even those who have spent their working lives in townships surrounding white cities are treated as "temporary sojourners." People are forcibly removed from their dwelling places in towns and cast out to the barren reserves. Women serving no purpose for the white economy are discarded, unable to see their husbands except during the annual two-week holiday allowed migrant workers. They fight for survival in the barren reserves, eking out existence from what little land is available. Kwashiorkor and other diseases associated with malnutrition are widespread, and death from starvation, particularly among children, is common in the reserves.

To maintain the subjugation of women in the bantustans, the apartheid régime has distorted African law and custom to serve its purposes.

Under what is now termed African customary law, unless an African woman has been "emancipated," she is deemed a perpetual minor, always under the guardianship of a man, (firstly her father and when she marries, her husband). Only unmarried women, widows or divorcees can apply to a Native Commissioner's Court for "emancipation". The woman's "character", education, abilities, and whether she owns immovable property are evaluated. If granted "emancipation", the woman becomes free of her guardian's control. Women cannot own property in their own right, claim inheritance or act as guardians of their children. Regardless of age and marital status, African women are made subject to the authority of men. The system is designed to ensure a docile, subservient reserve army of labour to be brought into industry when needed.

The position of white women corresponds to that of women in most other male-dominated societies. They endure inequalities in employment, wages and law, but at the same time enjoy other advantages merely because they are white. Coloured and Indian women, on the other hand, are discriminated against in the sphere of education, housing, employment, wages and health. Laws which have had detrimental effects on their family lives are those such as the Group Areas Act which has legislated the forced removal of black families to townships based on racial grouping.

Pass laws have been described as the "African worker's handcuffs." By controlling the movement of the African labour force, they prevent Africans from

selling their labour freely. All Africans over the age of 16, are forced to carry "passes" which prove employment status, residence and place of work and permission to seek work. Failure to produce a "pass" on demand renders an African worker liable to summary arrest. Passes for women were not introduced until the mid-fifties. When the announcement was made, South African women launched a massive campaign against them. The campaign intensified in 1956 when the Government issued passes to women least likely to protest women farm workers in particular. Protests grew throughout the country and in many towns women gathered together to burn their passes. Spear-headed by the Federation of South African Women with assistance from the African National Congress Women's League, of which the majority were women workers, the campaign steadily gained momentum during 1956 and culminated in a mass demonstration in Pretoria on 9 August 1956, the date now designated as South African Women's Day. On that day, women poured into Pretoria and Johannesburg from all over South Africa. Twenty thousand women assembled in Pretoria to present their protest to the Prime Minister. The women sang: "now you have touched the women, you have struck a rock, you have dislodged a boulder, you will be crushed."

Thousands of women took part in rallies, processions and demonstrations throughout the country. Zeerust, in the Western Transvaal, was the centre of a bitter struggle. In one town, only 76 out of 4,000 women accepted pass books, many burning them as an expression of defiance. The women's anger was not only directed against the State, but against chiefs who collaborated with the South African regime. Some very bloody incidents occurred during these acts of resistance and many women were beaten, shot, their houses burned and some forced into banishment. Despite this tremendous opposition, passes for women were introduced. However, this did not mean an end to women's protests, as they continued to organize against the pass laws throughout the country.

Whether to protest against the pass laws, the dipping tanks or the beerhalls, women in South Africa have organized - and are organizing - against what they see as an attack on their fundamental rights as citizens and human beings. Without the right to freedom of movement, freedom to organize and freedom of association, how can trade unions be free to advance the interests of the workers? The following extract from a speech by the general secretary of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), delivered at a conference on human rights last year, shows why independent African trade unions are rejecting the Government's latest "offer" of registration:

"A politically neutral trade union movement which is solely focused on economic and contractual problems can suffice only in a society where democratic rule is well established and where freedom

of association is an accepted fact for everyone.

"But where trade union rights are constantly called into question, trade unionists arrested, trade union organizations intervened and the right to strike suppressed in the most brutal way, this type of neutral trade union movement not only does

not serve the workers' cause but, worse still, is likely to be considered as the dictatorship's accomplice."

New attempts to shackle trade unions

The Wiehahn and Riekert Commissions recommended African trade unions be allowed "registered status." While this would appear to be a progressive step resulting from many decades of struggle for this right, careful investigation shows the contrary. Only registered trade unions, according to the recommendations, will be allowed to conclude agreements with employers or have trade union dues automatically deducted. The decision of whether or not a union is eligible for registration rests solely with the Industrial Registrar on criteria of "stability" and "suitability." This is the Government's way of ensuring that there will be no politics in the trade union movement, that is, there will be acceptance of apartheid. The system of State controlled registration of unions undermines the independence of the trade unions which participate in it, and saps the collective power of workers. But the effects are more than this. The Government's White Paper has further restricted this recommendation to exclude the majority of migrant workers from membership of registered African trade unions with the exception of a privileged few. Migrant workers not only comprise a large proportion of presently unregistered African trade unions, they are also often among the most active members and a large proportion of them are women. An example of the struggle that migrant workers, and women in particular, must wage in order to protect their rights and improve their working conditions is the strike action (which took place with the full support of the community including university and secondary students, church groups, political groups, trade unions and shopkeepers, against Fatti's and Moni's (F and M) products.

Not least important is the solidarity shown to both Food and Canning Workers' Union and the African Food and Canning Workers' Union by the international trade union movement. The following is a statement issued by the unions on the outcome of the dispute:

"On Thursday 8 November 1979, our union reached an agreement with Fatti's and Moni's whereby 66 workers are to return to work at F & M's Bellville factory as from 14 November 1979. This includes the five leaders of our union who were dismissed on 23 April 1979, and 51 fellow workers who were dismissed after refusing to work until an explanation had been given for the dismissal of the five, and who have stood firm for nearly seven months. There are also 70 of the original 88 dismissed workers who in July accepted the offer of re-employment by F & M's Bellville factory. They are not included in this agreement."

"The agreement reached is a victory of major importance for

-10-

the workers and our union. It is also a victory for workers everywhere, and for the organizations throughout the country and outside the country, who were prepared to support the workers' cause. We must emphasize that it was a victory at a tremendous price. The workers had to undergo great hardship. Children died. The

cost of supporting the workers exceeds R30, 000. F & M, too, had its price to pay. But it was a price F & M chose to pay through their refusal to negotiate with the union, and through their refusal to recognize the workers who had chosen to belong to the union.

"The agreement concluded is as follows:

(1) All 56 workers are to be re-employed at F & M, Bellville. Half the workers commence work on 14 November 1979, the other half on 21 November 1979. The most important reason for letting the workers return in two stages from our point of view was to enable F & M to carry out its promise of finding "alternative work" for any worker who will be retrenched to make way for the old workers.

(2) The workers will not necessarily take up the same jobs they had; however, it is written into the agreement that F & M undertakes to try and place them in their previous jobs as soon as possible.

(3) They will start with wages they were earning before the dispute; and if there has been an increase in wages for the job they are doing, their wages will be brought in to line with the rate paid for the job by the company within a month.

(4) F & M will seek the renewal of the contracts of the African contract workers all of which have expired, within a period of two months. F & M argued that it would need this period of time as it had a fixed quota of African contract workers, and it would have to wait for some existing contracts to expire before it could renew contracts of the returning workers. We emphasize here that the workers want employment that is legal and secure. Until F & M have renewed these contracts, they cannot be considered to have carried out the settlement.

(5) Special arrangements have been made for the African contract workers, many of whom have been unable to see their families in the Ciskei for over a year, to return home for two weeks over the Christmas period. F & M is to provide, at its expense, a bus to transport them there and back.

(6) The period during which workers were on strike will not constitute broken service. Their seniority will not be affected by the strike and they will receive their annual bonus, which is calculated on the basis of seniority, as though they had worked continuously.

-11-

(7) F & M has undertaken not to dismiss any of the 56 workers for a period of one year, unless for drunkenness

or stealing. They can only depart from this undertaking if they have given the workers a written warning and a copy of the warning sent to the union. Where a written warning has been given and the worker does not heed, F & M can still not summarily dismiss the worker.

The union must be notified 48 hours beforehand and at all stages permitted to investigate and make representations to the company.

(8) The union has undertaken not to press any wage demands for a period of a year. This undertaking was given largely in exchange for a guarantee against dismissals.

(9) The Union has undertaken to actively assist with the ending of the boycott of F & M's products"

Prominent women in the South African union movement

Any tribute to women workers who played a crucial part in the development of non-racial trade unionism would be incomplete without mentioning the women who helped to build both the Food and Canning Workers' Union (FCWU) and the African Food and Canning Workers' Union (A-FCWU), such as Elizabeth Mafekeng and Ray Alexander. These women saw the struggle of the African worker as inseparable from the political struggle of the African people. The participation of women workers in the trade union movement during the last decade has been enormous. Some of their actions have not yet been recorded, some cannot yet be told. In the Fatti and Moni strike and in-the Sea Harvest strike of 1980, women again came to the fore, and courageously fought for workers' rights and freedoms in South Africa.

(a.) Elizabeth Mafekeng

"One of the most outstanding women trade unionists, who has given her services to the Canning Union since she was a girl of fourteen, has been arbitrarily ordered to abandon her eleven children, her husband, her work and her home, for no other reason than that she has demanded higher wages for her members, the right to skilled jobs and human dignity for all."

(Workers' Unity, November 1959)

The news of Elizabeth Mafekeng's banishment order was received with shock throughout progressive circles in South Africa and other parts of the world. Elizabeth was born in Lesotho and came to Paarl in 1927. She started working for J. Jones & Co. canning factory in 1939. At that time workers' wages were seven shillings and sixpence per week. They worked long hours without overtime pay, sick-leave, workman's compensation, confinement allowance or protective clothing. Active in the union from its beginnings in 1941, Elizabeth was later elected President of the A-FCWU. She became a highly respected leader, able to combine trade-union work with the struggle for women's rights in the Federation of South African Women and for the political rights of oppressed Africans in the African National Congress (ANC). She

-12-

participated in the Defiance Campaign of 1952 and went to jail.

In 1955, Elizabeth represented South African Food Workers at an international conference in Sofia, Bulgaria, organized by the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU). Possessing no passport, and disguised as a servant, she boarded a ship bound for Europe on 24 June 1955. She attended the International Youth Festival in Warsaw where she was impressed by the rapid reconstruction which had taken place in Poland after the war.

In Sofia, she represented African workers at the Second International Conference of the Food, Tobacco, Hotel, Cafe and Restaurant Workers, attended by 122 delegates from 66 countries. Elizabeth spoke on the conditions of African workers in South Africa, the history of the FCWU and the A-FCWU and detailed attempts by white rulers to divide workers along racial lines. The response was overwhelming, "a great uproar ... which lasted for over half an hour ... delegates crowded around me, shaking hands, some kissing me, assuring us of their hearty support."

From Bulgaria she travelled to China and was surprised to learn that conditions there previous to the revolution had been worse than in South Africa. The remarkable changes, won through the struggles of the Chinese people, were an inspiration for the struggle back in South Africa. Of special interest had been improved conditions of work for women, particularly child-care facilities for working mothers.

On her return, Elizabeth addressed many meetings of workers, all eager to learn of her experiences overseas. Between 1955 and 1959, she continued to organize African workers and led them as President of the union. By 1959, she was also national vice-president of the AIN Women's League, member of the Cape ANC executive and active in the Federation of South African Women (FSAW).

In October 1959, Elizabeth and Liz Abrahams (acting general secretary of the FCWU) went to Port Elizabeth to assist workers organize a campaign against wage cuts by Langeberg Kooperasie management. Within weeks, she received banishment orders. She was sent to Southey, an isolated Bantu Affairs Department trust farm without facilities of any kind. No legitimate reason was given for banishment, other than that her presence was "injurious to the peace, order and good administration (sic) of the people of the Paarl district."

SACTU, the FCWU and the A-FCWU launched a publicity campaign. Letters and telegrams poured in from all over the world and thousands demonstrated in protest. Elizabeth delivered a farewell message on Sunday, 8 November 1959:

"I think everybody is upset today in this country. But I personally am not upset about my going, because I think that we mothers feel what the pass laws and other oppressive laws mean to us. We mothers are the people who gave birth to children and we are the people who suffer most from the laws of the Nationalist Government. "We must stand together and unite to fight for freedom".

SACTU demanded the repeal of the banishment order as it announced, "From the workers of Paarl, whose parents and grandparents

its kind in the world, the truth cannot be hidden. The workers know that it is the great farming interests who back the Verwoerd rule, who demand Mrs. Riefekeng's banishment. It is these same interests which recently secured a ban on canning workers which prevents them from striking for higher wages and has silenced ten Food and Canning workers' officials."

With the assistance of fellow-workers, Elizabeth Riefekeng was saved from banishment and smuggled into Lesotho, taking only the youngest of her eleven children with her. Though physically isolated from her comrades in South Africa, she kept in touch with the plight of South African workers. SACTU continually made appeals to South African workers for funds to assist her and her family. In February 1961, she sent this message to her fellow-workers regarding the proposed Stay-at-Home on 25 May.

"Today the power is in your hands. Through the use of the weapon of your labour power, you will find that nothing can prevent freedom in our lifetime."

She also reminded workers of the Freedom Charter preamble and especially the section dealing with the restoration of the national wealth to the people. Today Elizabeth Riefekeng remains in exile in Lesotho, never forgotten by the workers of South Africa. Just as she herself predicted, other leaders rose to take her place.

(b) Viola Hashe

When Viola Hashe was elected secretary general of the South African Clothing Workers' Union (SACWU), in March 1956, she became the first women leader of a, all male union in South Africa.

This Linnotti, founded in 1902 by Garthlabeni, is one of the oldest African trade unions in the country. When large numbers of African women entered the garment industry. Sally Sachs of the Garment Workers' Union organized them into a separate union for African women, the GWU of African Women.

Viola Hashe was born in 1926 in Gabashane. She was a teacher by profession. At one time she was assistant secretary of the Chemical Workers' Union and the Dirty Workers' Union. From 1956 on, she worked with SAMWU. She began as a typist, then became secretary to the late G. M. Nkomo, and after his death in 1955 she succeeded him as secretary general.

In 1957 and 1958, Viola Hashe served on the Transvaal Province executive of the CIO, and became the first regional chairperson of the West Rand region of the CIO.

It seems that Viola has the privilege of being the first woman to do a number of things, some of them more desirable than others. In 1956, for instance, she was the first woman to be threatened with deportation under Section 2 of the Urban Areas Act. As in the case of Elizabeth Riefekeng a few years later, no reasons were given except a vague reference to Viola "not

being good" for the township in which she lived. However, with the expert help of Mrs. Shulamith Muller, the Town Council was forced to back down seven hours before the order was to take effect.

This was a fortunate turn of events for the people of South Africa who would otherwise have been robbed of a distinguished and fearless leader. In her capacity as secretary general of the SACWJ, "she displayed exceptional qualities as a leader and served the union very well." An equally wellrespected leader in SACTU, she was a member of the management committee from 1956 onwards, and in 1960 became vice-president of SACTU.

An interesting side-line to the story of Viola's election to the vicepresidency is relevant. It was actually Lucy Mvubelo who made history in the South African trade union movement as the first vice-president of SACTU. She was elected at the inaugural conference of March 1955, but by 1959 had been seduced to the TUCSA-FOFATUSA camp and betrayed the principles of non-racial trade unionism upon which SACTU was founded. Viola Hashe, on the other hand resisted co-optation by the reformist elements and become one of SACTU's most dynamic leaders.

Viola representad SACTU at various wage board hearings, public meetings and in 1959 at the International Labour Organization conference in Geneva. In SACTU's important 1959 conference in Durban, she was a main speaker on "passes for women."

Presiding over the SACTU annual conference in 1960, after the state of emergency had been lifted, Viola summed up SACTT's attitude toihe increasing attacks onthe organization and its members. "We will not budge an inch. We will not be divided. The interests of the workers are one." Viola Hashe continued to carry out her work in the interests of all workers until the inevitable retribution of the State was directed against her. In 1963, she was banned and restricted to Roodeport where she lived until her recent and untimely death.

(c) Ray Alexander

Discussion of the food and canning workers of South Africa immediately brings to mind the name of Ray Alexander, the woman largely responsible for the formation of the Food and Canning Workers' Union and for its strength over the years. Ray was already banned from trade union activity by the time SACTU came into existence. However, even with the restrictions on her open activity, she continued to work behind the scenes, advising, writing, researching, and doing whatever possible to assist the workers and leaders of the FCWU, A-FMWU and SACTU.

From the early 1930s onwards, Ray Alexander organized workers into trade unions throughout the Cape. She played a leading role in the formation of the Commercial Employees' Union (forerunner in Cape Town of the National Union of Distributive Workers) and later assisted in organizing black workers into unions in the transport, chemical, sweet, laundry, tin and footwear industries. In late 1940, Ray organized the Food and Canning Workers' Union. By the

end of 1941, the FCWU was well-organized with branches in Cape Town, Paarl, Daljosophat, Wellington, Worcester, Groot Drakenstein and Stellenbosch. The Union represented all workers in the industry until 1947 when the Department of Labour threatened the Union with deregistration if African workers were not removed. A decision was then taken by the members to set up the AfricanFCWU which would continue to work closely as an equal partner with the FCWU. African workers made up about 15 per cent to 20 per cent of the labour force in the industry at the time, Coloured workers 80 per cent and white workers less than 5 per cent<sup>4</sup> Of the Coloured workers, 55 per cent were women. With the exception of white workers who occupied skilled positions, the food and canning workers represented some of the most exploited in the country; their wages were extremely low and they worked long hours without protective clothing and other benefits.

Ray Alexander, along with other leaders in both unions, fought hard for better wages and working conditions for these workers throughout the 1940s and 1950s. They also succeeded in mobilizing workers around broader issues; the food and canning workers were in the forefront of political campaigns initiated by the ANC and other groups in the Congress Alliance.

During this time, Ray was part of a minority in the South African Trade and Labour Council continually struggling to keep apartheid out of the trade union movement. In September 1953, she was ordered to resign her position as general secretary of the FCWU and prohibited from attending gatherings of any kind for two years. On her banning orders a sentence was added by the Minister of Justice forbidding her from assisting in any way the struggle for improved wages and working conditions.

The workers reacted by carrying out spontaneous protest strikes throughout the Cape Province. Thousands of workers from factories in Paarl, Groot Drakenstein, Worcester, Wellington, and Port Elizabeth staged strikes, varying from three hours to one day in length, and vowed to continue to fight against the banning orders on their general secretary. One hundred African women migrants from the Transkei went on strike in an East London factory. They wrote a tribute to Ray:

"By encouraging African workers to organize, you have brought new hope and dignity to thousands of workers. Sobuye sibonane (We will meet again)."

The régime had robbed the workers of one of their most respected leaders. The sense of outrage expressed by the workers at the time of Ray's banning was in itself an indication of the tremendous work she had carried out over the years. Undaunted by the ban on her open activities associated with trade unions, Ray continued to actively assist workers "behind the scenes" until she was forced to leave South Africa in 1965. Many black trade unionists owe their training to her and will never forget this disciplined young white woman who delivered lectures and generally assisted them in their work, always exuding warmth and energy. A further tribute was paid to Ray by the food and canning workers who elected her Life general secretary of the FCWU in 1957.

