

Moses Mabhida 1923 - 1986



In 1973 Eddie Webster conducted a survey of unregistered trade union members in Durban. Among other things he asked workers if they could "think of a leader present or past who can or could improve the position of African workers". The four most frequently mentioned leaders were Albert Luthuli, Chief Buthelezi, Nelson Mandela, and Moses Mabhida. It is likely that Mabhida's death on March 8 in Maputo was deeply mourned among workers of a certain generation, not merely because of the causes he so ably represented but because of their own personal experience of his leadership and inspiration. At the time of his death Mabhida was Secretary-General of the South African Communist Party as well as a long-standing member of the ANC's National Executive. Within South Africa though, before his departure into exile in 1960, he was principally known as a trade unionist and a senior official in SACTU.

Moses Mboheki Mncane Mabhida was born on 14 October 1923 on a farm at Thirnville, near Pietermaritzburg. His father was a farm worker who later worked as a labourer for the Pietermaritzburg electricity department. The family was poor and Moses was unable to complete his schooling beyond Standard Seven. While at school he made friends with Harry Gwala. Gwala ran a study group for senior boys at Mabhida's school. He encouraged Mabhida to read the Guardian and probably influenced his decision to join the Communist Party in December 1942. By then Moses had left school to work first as a waiter, then a railway worker, and later as a shop worker. His first trade union experience dated from his participation in a union organised by Gwala in the Pietermaritzburg distributive industry. Like many other African communists he played an active role in the ANC and by 1952 was assistant secretary of the Pietermaritzburg branch. His main commitment, though, through the 1940s and 1950s was to worker organisation; in 1953 he was asked by the clandestine SACP (which he helped to revive) to work as a full-time trade unionist. With Gwala he organised the Howick Rubber Workers' Union (which in the course of one of its strikes produced thousands of stickers with the cryptic but effective message of "rubber burns") as well as chemical workers in Pietermaritzburg. Moving to Durban in 1954 he was to help with the establishment of unions for Dairy workers, bakery workers, laundrymen, and workers in the transport sector.

In May 1955 Moses Mabhida led the formation of the Durban SACTU local committee over which he was to preside for the rest of the decade. SACTU was to develop a strong organisation in Durban and the surrounding industrial region. Mabhida was involved in the brave though relatively unsuccessful efforts to build a union for railway workers and also actively supported dockworkers in their three strikes against conditions under the Togat system. He established what was to grow into a large and vigorous General Workers' Union. This was a time of considerable industrial conflict and Mabhida was an active and militant leader. He was charged with incitement after a strike at a Hammarsdale clothing factory in 1960. He was a compelling orator, eloquent, passionate, even poetic, and like his party comrade, J B Marks, (also a good Marxist) not above using a religious metaphor if it suited the purpose: "The African is crucified on the cross of gold in the Transvaal and on the mealie stalk in the Orange Free State", he said in the course of a 1957 conference.

Mabhida was a member of the ANC's national executive from at least 1956. In Natal social conditions, labour militancy, and women's protest were all contributory factors in a massive growth in the ANC's following towards the end of the decade. SACTU and the ANC reciprocally contributed to each other's strength as was evident in such joint campaigns as the potato boycott, the one-pound-a-day campaign, and the 1959 three day stay-away - the latter especially well supported in Durban was called off prematurely, against the inclinations of Mabhida and the local trade union leadership. In the course of 1959, when the ANC was at its peak of popularity in Natal, Mabhida was to work closely with Chief Luthuli and both share the credit for the effective regional political leadership. Mabhida was acting-chairman of the Natal ANC between 1958-1959.

Mabhida left South Africa at the height of the Sharpeville crisis. After joining in the pass-burning protest of 28 March 1960 he crossed the Lesotho border following a decision by SACTU that he should represent South African workers at the International Labour Organisation. He was to spend the next twenty-six years, nearly half his life, in exile. The details of his work in the external organisations of the ANC, the SACP and SACTU have only been cryptically described in such publications as Sechaba and African Communist. He represented SACTU at various conferences, most notably in 1962 at the Casablanca All-African Trade Union Federation launch when he argued against the prevalent emphasis on racially defined nationalism and "African personality". He was active in the World

Federation of Trade Unions. In 1973 he was elected a vice-chairman of SACTU. But from 1962 onwards it seems likely that he was more strongly committed to directly political work. He was re-elected to the ANC's National Executive at the Lobatsi conference of October 1962 and the following year was to work full time for Umkhonto we Sizwe. When the post was created he became the first National Political Commissar of Umkhonto. He must have been popular in the training camps; the 1969 Morogoro Conference (called partly in response to rank and file dissatisfaction) elected him once again to the ANC executive, a much curtailed body of nine men. After Morogoro he was to serve as Secretary to the ANC's Revolutionary Council, the committee charged with re-establishing an ANC presence inside South Africa. He continued to hold his post in Umkhonto, effectively second-in-command, until the death of the SACP General Secretary, Moses Kotane, in 1979. Mabhida was chosen as Kotane's successor, confirmed as General Secretary in 1981. Though seriously ill in the last year of his life he led the Party until his death. He was buried after a state funeral in Maputo.

It is premature to attempt an assessment of Mabhida's life and his work. His virtues and failings are known best to his friends and political associates; neither the SACP nor the ANC encourage personality cults to develop around their functioning leaders and the presently available details provide little more than the bare contours of his career. He was born into a generation which had to struggle, not just in the political sense, but materially, for the most modest conditions of existence. In such a context to be an activist, a trade unionist, and a communist, took not simply courage; it required huge reserves of imagination and moral strength. Mabhida himself once said, rather ruefully, when describing his early efforts to understand Marxism that "none of this... came easily". As a Party theoretician, Mabhida had the strengths of his predecessor Kotane; a good if orthodox understanding of Marxism-Leninism (which was for example, to make him fiercely critical of Eurocommunism) and a subtle approach to nationalism. Under his leadership the Party was to emphasise the possibility of social revolution occurring through the national revolution as opposed to succeeding it as a wholly distinct process. The extent to which this is likely to happen can perhaps be estimated from the slogans which are shouted and the symbols which appear at black political gatherings: Mabhida's name and the Party's banner seem to be indispensable elements in the liturgy of liberation. Even this brief outline of Mabhida's life shows us that this is deservedly so.

(Tom Lodge, University of the Witwatersrand, May 1986)

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Sources: Good biographical entries on Mabhida are in S Gastrow, Who's who in African politics, Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1985, and T Karis and G Carter, From protest to challenge, Hoover Institution, Stanford, 1977. K Luckhardt and B Wall, Organize or starve, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1980, provides details of Mabhida's role in SACTU. Other information for this obituary derived from The African Communist, no 84, (1981), no 86 (1981), no 92 (1983), no 95 (1983); Karis and Carter microfilm collection, ref 11A 2: M2: 96; E Webster, "A profile of unregistered union members in Durban", African Studies seminar paper, University of the Witwatersrand, 1979; AIM press release on the Mabhida funeral, Maputo, 29.3.86; New Age 30.10.58, 10.9.59, 11.2.60, 3.3.60.

photo: communist banners in Lebowa at the funeral of Peter Nchabeleng, Northern Transvaal UDF president, died in detention



Statistics and Economic Notes for Trade Unions

Inflation

The inflation rate is still above 18%. It has been above 18% for the last five months. Most economists expect inflation to remain around this level, and above 16% for the rest of 1986. Rob Lee of the Old Mutual expects inflation to be just under 20% in 1987. (Business Day 5.5.86)

Unions who are negotiating mid-year wage agreements should thus count on 18-20% inflation in 1986/7. This will eat away a large part of the wage increases they obtain.

	Consumer Price Index (1980=100) April 1986	Annual Rate of Inflation (% Increase over 1 year) April 1986
Cape Town	219,2	16,7
Port Elizabeth	217,1	19,3
East London	205,5	16,3
Durban	221,4	14,9
Pietermaritzburg	223,5	16,4
Witwatersrand	223,6	20,2
Vaal Triangle	229,6	19,6
Pretoria	228,8	20,2
Klerksdorp	211,5	17,6
Bloemfontein	210,1	16,3
OFS Goldfields	228,2	19,0
Kimberley	213,0	16,6
South Africa	222,2	18,6

SOURCE: Central Statistical Services; information for April 1986

Across-the-board wage increases

Some wage negotiations are just about minimum rates of pay. This is especially the case with industrial council agreements. Minimum rates are the solid ground for wage demands but problems arise

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when some workers are paid above the minimum. The minimum rate may rise, but they don't get a cent more in their pay packet because they are already above the minimum.

This is why many agreements provide for a wage increase for all workers, whatever their wages are. This is called an "across-the-board" (ATB) wage increase.

Sometimes the ATB increase gives the same rand increase to all workers, whatever their wage. This happened recently in the Pick 'n Pay wage agreement when all workers got an R85 increase per month. This was a nice increase for workers on the minimum rate of R301 per month, they got 28% more, but for a worker who earned R600 per month, the percentage of increase was less, only 14%. This is below the rate of inflation. "Higher paid" workers often find their real wages falling if union policy is to demand equal wage increases across-the-board for all workers.

There may be good reasons why workers decide to demand an ATB in rand terms. A loaf of bread costs the same for everyone. Lower paid workers on starvation wages need and deserve a bigger percentage wage increase.

The other form of ATB increase is an equal increase in percentage terms for all workers. For example, the NUM has demanded a 45% wage increase for all mineworkers. This ensures that all workers get an increase above the rate of inflation. But this also means that the lowest paid worker, on R193 a month, gets only a R87 increase, while a category 8 worker on R600 a month gets a R270 increase. This increases the "wage-gap" between categories of workers and may make it easier for employers, at a later stage, to split the unity of workers.

There is no simple answer to these problems, but it shows there is a need for unions to monitor the effects of their demands on the whole wage structure of a firm or an industry. Why should Raymond Ackerman get away with paying less than inflation to any of his workers? What differences between wage levels do workers want to see in a firm?

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