

Name: Lawrence Ndzanga

Date of birth: 1924

Date of death: 8 January 1977



Lawrence Ndzanga
<http://www.sahistory.org.za/c>

In summary: Lawrence Ndzanga worked for labour unions, including the South African Railway and Harbours Workers Union and the South African Congress of Trade Unions. He was first banned in 1964 and later incarcerated in 1969. After his release, Ndzanga continued underground work for SAHWU and SACTU. In 1976 Lawrence was arrested for a second time under the Terrorism Act No. 83 of 1967. After a short period of time in prison, Ndzanga reportedly died of heart failure.

Lawrence Ndzanga was a prominent figure in anti-[apartheid](#) labour union movements but, like many others, fell victim to apartheid. On 8 January 1977, Lawrence Ndzanga allegedly suffered a fatal heart attack while incarcerated at Fort Prison in [Johannesburg](#). Much of his story leading up to multiple unjust arrests due to his role as an activist also involved his wife.

Lawrence Ndzanga and his wife [Rita Ndzanga](#) worked together for years in the [South African Railway and Harbours Workers Union](#) (SARHWU) and the [South African Congress of Trade Unions](#) (SACTU). Although his death was recorded as a heart attack in prison, some evidence suggests Lawrence, like many others, may have been tortured and killed.

The first organization Lawrence dedicated his work to was the South African Railway and Harbours Workers Union. There, Lawrence worked in an executive position and aided its merge with the South African Congress of Trade Unions in 1955. Lawrence and his wife also

worked with kids ‘during this time in the youth organisations.’¹ ‘While working at the South African Railway and Harbours Workers Union, Lawrence and Rita developed a relationship and got married in 1956. Living in [Soweto](#), Lawrence made a living by ‘collecting clothes for dry cleaning’² and spent his free time recruiting members for the South African Railway and Harbours Workers Union. Lawrence would go to railways and gather workers together for the union. Lawrence was constantly recruiting new members through his national recognition and propaganda. An example of his work is shown in a photograph of him with his coworkers in the South African Railway and Harbour Workers Union.³ Working as a recruiter for the labor union was no easy task. More often than not, Lawrence would be forced to recruit under the disguise of



South African Railway and Harbour Workers Union, Transvaal. Lawrence Ndzanga, Organizer (top left corner)

a railway worker.

As a leader of the labor unions movement in apartheid South Africa, Lawrence was on the government’s radar. In one harrowing account told by his wife Rita, Lawrence once went to

[Bloemfontein](#) disguised in a brown railway overall, but he forgot to remove his tie. He was talking to the workers as if he was one of them. And then somebody spotted and reported him. The workers saw the police coming and walked along with him to a goods train that was about to move. They bundled him into the goods train but someone saw him at the back of the goods

¹ Tribute By Deputy President Kgalema Motlanthe to former Mayor of Johannesburg, Amos Masondo. *States News Service*, May 26, 2011.

² Interview conducted by Sifiso Ndlovu, 24 January 2001, Soweto, SADET Oral History Project. <http://thabombekiafricanleadershipinstitute.blogspot.com/2014/08/the-story-of-r-ita-ndzanga-unknown.html>

³ Ken Luckhardt and Brenda Wall, *Organize or Starve!* (London: Lawrence and Wishart Ltd London, 1980), 23

train. And the spies said: ‘*Daardie een met die rooi tie!*’ He had a red tie on. So he had to get off and run. There were houses next to the station and somebody from one of these took him by car to the next station to get a train there to come back home.⁴

Lawrence was only able to keep this up for so long. In April 1964, Lawrence was banned and ‘prohibited from leaving the magisterial district of Johannesburg and required to report to the police at [John Vorster Square](#) once a week.’⁵ Lawrence struggled to work as a clothes collector for dry cleaners while banned. In 1966, the South African Congress of Trade Unions published a formal complaint to the [International Labor Organization](#) in Geneva, Switzerland. This document mentions Lawrence Ndzanga as an official who was unlawfully denied the right to work and serve under any union. As a dry cleaner, Lawrence ‘was refused permission to enter African Townships for the purpose of collecting dry-cleaning and refused permission to enter the factory which employs him as a dry-cleaning agent.’⁶ Essentially, Lawrence was refused the right to access any area he would need to go for work. Forced to work underground, Lawrence continued to recruit for the South African Railway and Harbours Workers Union and the South African Congress of Trade Unions.

On 12 May 1969, Lawrence Ndzanga and his wife Rita were detained under ‘Section 6 of the [Terrorism Act](#) and the [Suppression of Communism Act](#).’⁷ With them were twenty of their closest activist colleagues including [Winnie Mandela](#). All twenty-two activists were sentenced and imprisoned. One account of Lawrence’s experience describes,

⁴ Interview conducted by Sifiso Ndlovu, 24 January 2001, Soweto, SADET Oral History Project.

⁵ Ibid

⁶ South African Congress of Trade Unions, memorandum to International Labour Organisation ‘Definitive Report - Report No 85, 1963.’ *FOA Case Text*. N.p., n.d.

⁷ The Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights in Washington D.C. ‘Death In Detention In South Africa.’ (1977): n. pag.

Web. http://psimg.jstor.org/fsi/img/pdf/t0/10.5555/al.sff.document.nuun1977_47_final.pdf

*'When I refused to make a statement they called an African policeman ... He brought bricks. He said 'I will show you'. He showed me a balcony with a rope hanging from it'. Ndzanga stood on the three bricks. They hit him and kept him standing the following day. Major Swanepoel refused to let him go to the toilet and passed water while standing.'*⁸

After spending six months in detention, Lawrence and Rita went to court and were acquitted of all charges. Upon being acquitted, Lawrence and his wife were both immediately detained. Released later in 1970, Lawrence was given another banning order. Throughout the 1970s, Lawrence continued to recruit for the South African Railway and Harbour Workers Union. He would continue his work until 1976 when he and his wife were detained for a third time on. Lawrence was separated from his wife and sent to Fort Prison in Johannesburg. On 8 January 1977, after spending a mere 51 days in prison, Lawrence is reported to have suffered fatal 'heart failure' at the age of 53.⁹ One day after Lawrence's funeral, Rita was released from jail and all charges against her dropped.

Many chilling accounts of death in detention lack transparent evidence. Almost all deaths in detention during this time were recorded as natural causes, accidents, or suicide. In fact, 36 of the 41 recorded deaths in detention up to 1977 were recorded as such. According to the records, *'A large number of the deaths, including the so-called suicides by hanging, have occurred in the Pretoria/Johannesburg region,'* where Lawrence Ndzanga died.¹⁰ Of the 41 killed up to 1977, *'The majority of those detained were held under the Terrorism Act.'*¹¹ Lawrence Ndzanga was

⁸ 'Trial by Torture – The Case of the 22,' (The International Defence and Aid Fund, May 1970) http://www.historicalpapers.wits.ac.za/inventories/inv_pdf/A3299/A3299-G1-1-14-001-jpeg.pdf

⁹ Jack Mapanje. *Gathering Seaweed: African Prison Writing*. Heinemann, 2002.

¹⁰ The Lawyers Committee.

¹¹ The Lawyers Committee.

detained in Fort Prison, Johannesburg, charged under the Terrorism Act and the Suppression of Communism Act.¹² Furthermore, he was part of the majority that allegedly died of natural causes no more than two months into detainment. Most of this evidence suggests Lawrence was killed in detention. Most alarming of all was the fact that Rita was unable to attend his funeral and unexpectedly exonerated the next day. Many detainees who died in prison were never seen again by their families. Any inquiries into their deaths would be cause for harassment or punishment, which left many families and spouses searching for answers. For instance, Looksmart Solwandle Ngudle who was detained in Pretoria, reportedly hung himself with his pajama bottoms. Upon hearing the news, his family requested to see his body only to find out he was buried immediately after his death. When witnesses tried to come forward, the apartheid state took efforts to silence them:

*Lawyers wishing to produce evidence in court that Mr. Ngudle died as a result of torture were prevented from doing so. On 25 October 1963, Mr. Ngudle was banned posthumously thus making it illegal to publish any statement made by him during his life. Witnesses willing to testify concerning Mr. Ngudle's torture were also banned.*¹³

These accounts go on to reveal a harrowing pattern of unexplained deaths. In addition, Rita Ndzanga received unusually brutal torture multiple times. It is clear the work Lawrence and his wife were doing resulted in mistreatment in prison. Rita was tortured profusely recounting,

They dragged me to another room, hitting me with their open hands all the time...they ordered me to take off my shoes and stand on three bricks. I refused to stand on the bricks. One of the white Security Police climbed on a chair and pulled me by my hair, dropped me on the bricks. I fell down and hit a gas pipe. The same man pulled me up by

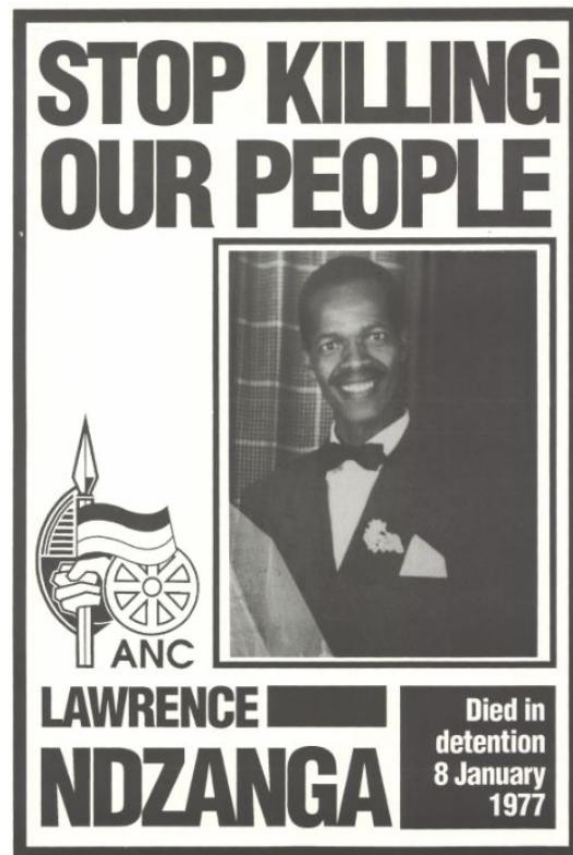
¹² SAHA - South African History Archive - *Death in Detention: Remembering Lawrence Ndzanga*

¹³ The Lawyers Committee.

*my hair again, jerked me and I again fell on the metal gas pipe. They threw water on my face.*¹⁴

Like Lawrence's experience, Rita's account involved bricks and staying positioned for an extended period of time. In the heart of one of the worst places to be imprisoned during that time, Lawrence's death was seemingly no accident. In spite of his death, Lawrence Ndzanga's work did not go unnoticed.

Like his earlier work, Lawrence was recognized by the [African National Congress](#) after his death in Fort Prison. The ANC made a poster with a photo of young Lawrence.¹⁵ It is clear that at the time Lawrence was respected and revered. His death also did not become noticed as an accident. Rightfully so, this poster represents Lawrence as a martyr who gave his life to a cause he believed in.¹⁶ It is important we not forget these people who are responsible for the end of apartheid in South Africa. In today's modern South Africa,



Lawrence Ndzanga has been recognized as a fallen hero. Having worked with current [President Zuma](#), Lawrence has earned tribute where necessary. On the 100th anniversary of the ANC, President Zuma recognized those who dedicated their work to the anti-apartheid movement. On 8

¹⁴ *Thabo Mbeki African Leadership Institute (TMALI)*

¹⁵ *SAHA - South African History Archive - Death in Detention: Remembering Lawrence Ndzanga*

¹⁶ *SAHA - South African History Archive - Death in Detention: Remembering Lawrence Ndzanga*

January 2012, Zuma gave a speech and mentioned, ‘Special mention can be made of comrades like Joe Gqabi, Winnie Mandela, Harry Gwala, Zoli Malindi... Lawrence and Rita Ndzanga...and others, who continued the link with ANC through exile.’¹⁷ And most recently in April of 2017, Lawrence Ndzanga and his wife Rita were awarded The National Order award in silver for their actions and involvement in the anti-apartheid movement. President Zuma announced, ‘The Order of Ikhamanga recognises South African citizens who have excelled in the fields of arts, culture, literature, music, journalism and sport... “The 22 ANC Political Trialists of 1969”...Mr. Lawrence Ndzanga and Mrs. Rita Ndzanga.’¹⁸ This amazing award was bestowed by the Presidency of South Africa, along with the twenty other activists Lawrence and his wife were detained with. Although much of Lawrence’s life went undocumented, he was not forgotten and did not die in vain.

Little of Lawrence’s life was documented. He was a hero to so many yet his story has never been fully told. Perhaps if it was not for his wife, none of this information would be available. His only surviving family member was his wife who went on to carry and develop his vision into a reality. The story and evolution of apartheid in South Africa took decades to develop and work out. If it was not for people like Lawrence Ndzanga and his wife Rita, the anti-apartheid movement would have been much less effective. Although Lawrence fell victim to death in detention, his legacy was carried on by his wife.

¹⁷ Executive Summary of the Statement of the National Executive Committee of the African National Congress Delivered By President Jacob Zuma On the Occasion of the 100th Anniversary of the ANC

¹⁸ Government of South Africa Pretoria. (2017, April 28). President Jacob Zuma Bestows 2017 National Orders Awards [press release]. *All Africa*, p. All Africa, April 28, 2017.

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