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Edited by Bonnie Blamick

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Cover illustration: Ms. Mvubelo talking with Ms. Blamick. *Courtesy of Los Angeles World Affairs Council*

INTRODUCTION

Lucy Mvubelo was elected South African Woman of the Year for 1979 by a half million women readers of the Johannesburg Star. In presenting Ms. Mvubelo with the trophy and a check, the editor of the Star, Harvey Tyson, said:

"The winner today reminds us that racialism has been allowed for too long to dominate our actions and our thinking in this country.

"Our winner is a moderate, who does not ignore the realities and the differences, but who does ignore the ugly pressures that are brought to bear by extremists on both sides of the color-bar."

Other comments on her election included:

"She is a wise and courageous woman."

"A fighter."

"Sincere and faithful for thousands of black workers."

Ms Mvubelo received the award dressed in a bright pink dress and, wiping tears from her eyes, she replied:

"I never knew that so many men and women followed what I do."

Lucy Mvubelo was born in Johannesburg in 1920 and has lived there most of her life. Her early education was at the Doornfontein School of the American Board of Missions. She then attended Inanda Seminar, a private girls' school in Natal, where she completed Standard Eight. In those days Africans could begin teaching with only a primary school certificate. She was eighteen and had been teaching for about six months, when she married Mr. McKenzie Mvuebelo, also a teacher. Salaries were very

low and this motivated her to leave teaching in a few years and to enter the burgeoning clothing industry.

Lucy's father, a laborer, had belonged to the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union, organized by a charismatic leader named Clements Kadalie from what was then Nyasaland. It was the most influential black union in the 1920s.

Lucy became involved with the Garment Worker's Union in 1946, and was the first black woman elected to the National Executive Council of the Trade Union Council of South Africa, (TUCSA). Lucy Mvubelo is now General Secretary of the 21,000 strong National Union of Clothing Workers.

To put Lucy's role into perspective one can do no better than to quote from the prestigious and well informed British publication Africa Confidential. In its issue of November 28, 1979, the lead article is on "South Africa: Trade Union Tactics":

"The potential power of organized black urban labour to crack the structure of apartheid receives surprisingly little publicity, compared with attention given to the more widely considered options of violent revolution (as favoured by the African National Congress and the Pan Africanist Congress) or evolution (as argued mainly by white liberal reformist groups, such as the Progressive Federal Party).

. . . .

"At present, the black labour movement in the urban areas is not yet extensive and remains weak. But recent decisions within the Afrikaner-dominated ruling Nationalist Party have heightened the need for politically-motivated labour leaders, aware of their power -- if cleverly harnessed -- to bring the most sophisticated industrial machine on the African continent to a halt, to clarify their tactical options."

It is within this context that Lucy Mvubelo may have a seminal role to play in South African history. In addition to her union activities, Lucy is a member of the Management Committee of the United States-South African Leader Exchange Program. In addition to the exchange of people of all races (a recent American Team Visit of university presidents was headed by Father Hesburgh of Notre Dame), USSALEP has a Careers Development Program now approaching a half million dollars, which gives blacks mid-career training in South Africa and in America.

Lucy is also co-chairman of "Women For Peace." This organization is composed primarily of black and Afrikaans-speaking white women who want racial peace and who have modeled their organization on the "Women For Peace" movement in Northern Ireland, which brought its Catholic and Protestant founders the Nobel Peace Prize.

Lucy has just completed a speaking tour of the United States sponsored by the South African Foundation, a strictly non-governmental organization formed by South African leaders of all races whose members initially wanted only to improve the image of their country overseas but who have in recent years attempted to improve race relations within South Africa. Lucy Mvubelo is a trustee of the Foundation.

A letter to the editor from Anna Scheepers, veteran Afrikaner labor organizer and President of the Garment Workers' Union of South Africa, sums up the esteem with which Lucy Mvubelo is held by her fellow unionists:

"Lucy is respected by a wide spectrum of the South African population and has done much for her people to earn their loyalty."*

The following essay is based on remarks made by Lucy before the Los Angeles World Affairs Council and at the California Institute of Technology YMCA Forum, and in personal conversations with the editor of this issue. All footnotes are by the editor.

Bonnie Blamick

We wish to thank Wilma Fairchild for copy editing and Linda Benjamin for typing the manuscript.

*Personal letter November 14, 1979.

A BLACK SOUTH AFRICAN TRADE UNION LEADER LOOKS AT THE ROLE OF AMERICAN COMPANIES IN SOUTH AFRICA

Lucy Mvubelo

When the Nationalist Party assumed power in South Africa in 1948, one of their expressed goals was the eventual elimination of conflicts among the various racial groups in our country. The party's solution to these conflicts aimed at a separation of the races, with the black man confined to the lower levels of society -- socially, economically, and politically. Many policies have been implemented to achieve this separation, all attempting to "keep the black man down."

The homeland system is seen as one solution to racial tensions. This system involves the creation of nine independent black republics which later will form part of a constellation of states, or a "Commonwealth of Southern Africa." Three of the republics have already been inaugurated -- the Transkei, Lebowa, and Bophuthatswana. The government is very anxious that the homeland system be successful. It is now attempting to buy land in the homeland areas from white farmers, to be given back to black owners. But it will take a long time for this matter of land ownership to be settled satisfactorily because the present distribution is so uneven. Blacks now own only 13 percent of South African land, while whites control 87 percent.

Steve Biko, the martyred student leader, has called these homelands "tribal cocoons," asserting that one motivation for their creation is the fostering of tension among African ethnic groups at the expense of a unified drive for the political freedom we desire. I, too, dislike this "cutting up" of South Africa, and do not feel that the independence thus gained is true independence. I am also concerned about the fact that the decision by these republics to accept this independence appears to be an irreversible one.

Besides dividing the black population, the homeland system serves to keep the black inhabitants of these areas in a backward state, both economically and socially. There are no "proper towns" in the homeland areas where women can do their shopping. Also, no industrial councils or unions are associated with the homeland industries. The firms here, unlike those in metropolitan areas, are free to pay their employees any wage they wish.

The pass system has been the most hated of the Nationalist government's policies. Although originally created in 1923 by the Urban Areas Act, the pass system has been altered by this government to place even greater restrictions on black movement into urban areas. It forces the majority of black males who work in the cities to be separated from their families, and prevents them from staying longer than seventy-two hours in an urban area in which they are not employed. Most of these workers live in designated "bachelor quarters," while their wives and children remain in the homeland areas.

In 1960 demonstrations against the pass system were organized by the Pan-African Congress. The demonstrations led to bloodshed in both Sharpeville and Langa, and finally, to the banning of both the PAC and the African National Congress.[1]

The ANC is the oldest black political organization, originating in 1912. It has never gained enough strength, however, to reach its goals. In 1958 the PAC broke away from the ANC. It was formed by a group of students who felt that the ANC was not being aggressive enough in pressing for racial equality and

[1]*On March 18, 1960, Robert Sobukwe, president of the PAC, announced that within 72 hours, there would be a call by the PAC for the abolition of pass laws. He also demanded a minimum wage of 35 pounds per month for all black workers. On March 21, Sobukwe led PAC leaders to police headquarters in Orlando. There they offered themselves up for arrest after destroying their passes, and were subsequently jailed.*

Similar demonstrations took place in other towns, with a total of about 50,000 blacks participating. Results were disastrous in Sharpeville and Langa. In Sharpeville, the crowd "appeared menacing" to the 75 police present. They opened fire, pouring about 700 shots into the crowd; 69 Africans were killed and 180 were wounded. In Langa, a crowd of about 10,000 gathered outside the "bachelor quarters," remaining there for most of the day. Late that afternoon a resolution was passed disallowing public meetings. The blacks were ordered to disperse, and have given three minutes to do so. At the end of that time, 60 policemen charged into the mass of people, beating them with batons and throwing stones. Finally, they fired into the fleeing crowd. Two Africans were killed, and 49 wounded.

workers' rights. The formation of this new group was a great encouragement to the blacks of our country. We felt that perhaps the emergence of this movement would cause the government to become more receptive to the desires of our people. The opposite has proved to be true. In 1960, the ANC and the PAC were declared "unlawful organizations, a serious threat to public safety." Since that time, blacks have not been allowed membership in any openly national political organizations in South Africa proper.[2]

Blacks who attend white universities have also been prohibited from becoming part of the Student Representative Councils. Blacks at the so-called "black universities" were permitted to form the South African Students Organization (SASO) as a black students union. The government views SASO as a threat, yet it is responsible for SASO's existence. The students were motivated to form this union by the law that prevented them from associating with their white counterparts.

About the same time that SASO was being established, Steve Biko became active on issues concerning black consciousness -- a concept readily accepted by students.[3]

Prejudice toward black counterparts has also existed among members of white trade unions. These unions often negotiated for their own members, and did not include black workers in agreements that were made. This is one reason for the very wide wage gap that exists in our industries. Often black employees are paid less than one-quarter of the wage received by a white worker doing the same job.

The Nationalist government seems to want to believe that trade unions exist only among whites, Asians, and Coloureds. Although blacks constitute more than 60 percent of South Africa's work force, the black trade unions have never been recognized by law. Our workers do not have a true voice in determining their wages and working conditions, and the black unions have no legal avenues through which to battle for the rights of their members.

[2]*Inkatha, a possible exception, is originally a Zulu cultural organization led by Chief Gatsha Buthelezi. It has now been broadened to include other African ethnic groups and clearly has political goals. It is prepared, for example, to contest elections in Soweto.*

[3]*F. Fanon described the concept of black consciousness appropriately in his book, Black Skins, White Masks. He says, "I am not a potentiality of something. I am wholly what I am. I do not have to look for the universal. No probability has any place inside me. My negro consciousness does not hold itself out aa black. It IS. It is its own follower. That is all we blacks are after, TO BE. We believe that we are quite efficient in handling our BE-ness and for this purpose we are self-sufficient."*

We have been something like a social welfare organization. There are no laws preventing our organization, but neither do we possess any significant powers.

The status of black trade unions may be improving, though. Just two years ago, a commission was appointed to investigate our country's labor legislation.[4] The chairman of the commission was Professor Nicholas Wiehahn, a lecturer on industrial relations at the University of South Africa.

In May of 1979, the commission pronounced its recommendations -- recommendations that caused great rejoicing among black trade unionists. We felt as though we had hit the jackpot. For us, the most important of Professor Wiehahn's statements was that he supported the recognition of African trade unions, and felt that they should be free to incorporate all black workers.

But our joy was short-lived. Two weeks after the commission had published its report, Parliament altered many of the proposed changes. Most significantly, it divided black workers into two groups -- urban residents and commuters or "frontier workers," -- and stated that the commuters, most of whom are in the mining industry, could not be organized into unions.

The modifications made by Parliament came like a slap in the face to us after we had so heartily endorsed Professor Wiehahn's recommendations. So, shortly after the amendments were publicized we submitted a memorandum to the Minister of Labor, stating that they would be a source of friction and discontent. Many of the frontier workers were already members of a union, and had contributed both time and money to it. To exclude these workers from union membership, and from its benefits, could create a situation similar to the 1976 student riots. We also stated that, under the present conditions, we would prefer not to be recognized and to remain free of government restrictions.

[4]*The appointment of this "Commission of Inquiry" was announced by the Minister of Labor, Mr. S. P. Botha, during the 1977 Labor vote in Parliament. It was to investigate thirteen existing pieces of labor legislation with reference to given criteria. The members were concerned with adjusting South Africa's present labor system to respond to changing economic situations, and to aid in the prevention and settlement of disputes. They also wanted to eliminate bottlenecks that occur in the activities of labor organizations, and to provide a base for "sound labor relations."*

I believe that this memorandum had some effect on the Minister. At the congress of the Trade Union Council[5] on September 12, 1979, in Cape Town, he was questioned about these same amendments. His only reply was that he was still consulting with the presidents of the unions concerned, and that he would see what could be done about the situation.

Less than two weeks later, on September 28, a law was passed permitting all black workers to unionize, with only a few exceptions. We were informed that mine workers with homes in the states of Mozambique, Lesotho, Botswana, and Swaziland, would not be unionized. There is nothing we can do to change this, since these workers are under the control of their home governments.

Yet, even the mine workers who are able to unionize are in a difficult situation. The top-ranking officials in the mining industry are all hard-line Afrikaners who have never accepted even a Coloured worker as a counterpart. These workers generally are hired on contract, and come to the metropolitan area for just nine months at a time. For the mine workers to bring their families with them would not be feasible at present, as it would lead to social tensions and to shortages of such necessities as housing and hospital facilities. I think it is time for all unions, regardless of race, to work together to formulate a strategy by which the situation of mine workers, and of all migrant workers, can be improved.

[5]*The Trade Union Council, the largest coordinating body in 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." The Council also began to support the idea of recognition of black unions, and opposed the practice of job reservation.*

The Council faced increasing opposition, both from the government and from some of its own member unions, for these policies. In response, at a Special Conference in 1967, it passed a resolution stating that membership in the Council should be limited to registered unions, but that blacks should be allowed membership in such registered trade unions. This resolution resulted in warnings to the Council from the Minister of Labor, and in the withdrawal of opposing members.

Finally, the Council was forced to change its policies to retain unity, and to convince withdrawn members to re-affiliate. In 1969, it voted to end the affiliation of all black trade unions.

The urban black is also in a very critical situation. In the cities, population density reaches its peak, and workers of all races are closely integrated, often more so than in America. There is no way physically to separate the white, Asian, Coloured, and black populations and racial tension is often high.

If we blacks are ever to be liberated from the bondage of apartheid, changes will have to occur in both our political and our economic positions. It is the urban black person who will determine the direction of this change -- whether advances will come through peaceful developments, or whether violence will be employed.

The question of "evolution or revolution" is often raised when the question of black equality is raised. I believe that evolution will occur. I do not condone the use of violence and, perhaps due to our strong Christian background in South Africa, neither do most of my people.

If a revolution were to take place, it would not be analogous to a war with a foreign country. We would be fighting against fellow South Africans, which certainly detracts from the appeal of a violent solution to our problems.

In order for a revolution to be successful, it must have the popular support of the working class, and must also receive some backing from the intellectuals. However, in South Africa it is only the Communists who favor revolution, and their influence is steadily declining.

Moreover, the concept of revolution as a means of gaining political power can become popular only in a situation where it is seen as the sole hope for the future. Desire for revolution will spread when the individuals have no personal aspirations. This is not the situation in South Africa. Our economy is a growing economy, and the black workers are an integral part of this growth. The emergence of the Afrikaner businessman and the modification of apartheid have assured the black that he will always have a place in urban society.

Although the state of hopeless poverty and oppression that fosters revolution does not exist at present, it could be brought about by detrimental political developments. I am particularly concerned about the "boycott theory" being advocated as a means to protest apartheid. Nations are being advised to boycott South African goods, often at great loss to themselves. Proponents of the theory are advising even countries that face internal food shortages to stop importing our maize, sugar, wheat, fruit, and other agricultural items. Other nations that are entirely dependent on South Africa for metals and minerals are being urged not to buy these commodities. And in the midst of a world-wide energy crisis, consumers are being asked to boycott our country's coal.

If this boycott theory is carried out, who will be the chief sufferer? Clearly the black, especially the urban black, will feel the greatest effects. He will be subject to starvation, will be the first to lose his job and the first to die in a revolution. If boycotting becomes widespread, it may eventually change the attitudes of the Nationalist government, but its primary effect will be upon the black population.

I sometimes think that those in America, both black and white, who advocate an armed struggle are really saying to me and to my son and to all my black workers: "Go ahead and fight, we'll hold your coats." This is a frightening prospect with tragic possibilities.

My major mission in coming to the United States is to discuss the role of American companies in South Africa, and to counteract the idea that withdrawal of these companies would prove to be an effective protest against apartheid.

Ten years ago, American companies dealt with their employees according to the principles of apartheid because they felt that they should accommodate to the policies of the home government. American companies did not train their black employees, and paid them consistently lower wages than those received by whites. I am happy to say, though, that the situation has changed. The majority of American companies now treat members of all racial groups equally, as in the United States. Because of this, our children now have much brighter prospects for future employment.

In the 1960s the only jobs available to blacks were those of lowest rank. Blacks with proper qualifications could teach, but others, even with college degrees, were forced to accept such positions as that of a shop messenger, manual laborer, or a bank teller. Now, American companies are giving blacks the chance to move into the ranks of skilled labor and even into management positions.

Let me use my son as an example of this. He graduated from one of our universities in 1967, but even with a degree was not able to find a satisfactory job. His first position was with an institution for the mentally retarded. In 1968, he went to work for a South African bank. My son stayed with this bank until 1971, when he spotted an advertisement by an American company in the local newspaper. The ad read, "Wanted: Computer operators. Will train." After seeing the ad, he came home very excited. This seemed like a perfect opportunity -- a chance to advance himself, and to earn a salary on which he could someday support a family.

My son was hired by this company soon after he applied, and was trained, along with employees of all other races, to be a computer operator. He has since been promoted to an administrative position with that same company.

By hiring employees such as my son, American companies are showing their appreciation for the educated young black. On the other hand, the apartheid policy has always discouraged black children from continuing their education. Instead, they say, "Why should I strive to become more educated? It won't improve the type of job I can find." But again, things are changing. Largely due to the influence of your companies, an increasing number of our children are working toward college degrees.

Black people in South Africa need jobs and from my point of view those who advocate disinvestment in my country are kicking the black masses in the teeth.

Because education and training have been limited for so long, it is still difficult to find qualified blacks for the new positions that are opening up for our people. This has led to an extraordinary situation in the Careers Development Program of the United States-South African Leader Exchange Program of which I am a trustee. In operating our training program for mid-career blacks to qualify them for high managerial positions, we have felt it important to have a black executive director. We find that given the peculiar labor market in South Africa just now, we could employ a highly competent white personnel officer for about $20,000 a year but have to pay about $30,000 if we want a highly competent black personnel officer. This anomaly will not last long.

After the 1976 student riots, the government realized that it must change its policies regarding black education. Although there are still shortages of black teachers, and of accommodations in black universities, our educational system on the whole has been upgraded. Technical colleges are being built for our children, and many of our teachers are returning to school to further their own education.

Now, in the light of the number of educational opportunities available to blacks, why is the disinvestment of American companies being proposed? Removing the jobs created by the presence of these companies also removed the major inventive for our children to obtain higher education.

The attitude of those who advocate disinvestment is irresponsible. I appreciate their concern for us, but they need to realize that if American companies are withdrawn from South Africa, the employment situation will regress to its former state. Your withdrawal will make the government feel that it is free to continue indefinitely its policy of apartheid.

So, I beg of you, please campaign against those who advocate disinvestment. Let them know that the presence of foreign companies is beneficial to the black people, and provides both job opportunities and the motivation for attaining higher standards of education. Perhaps, too, South African firms will

follow this example and begin to hire educated blacks to help fill the shortage of skilled labor that has always existed in our country.

South Africa is changing, as blacks become more organized, better educated, and more vocal. If change is to continue, and if the policy of apartheid is eventually to break down completely, it is important for whites and blacks to work together. We must first help the Afrikaner to overcome his fear of being swamped by the black population. White workers also need to become accustomed to the presence of black counterparts in skilled and managerial roles. Perhaps then the government will be receptive to the idea of removing some of its discriminatory laws.

The new Botha Government is one which has showed a change of heart. It is not the Government of yesterday. Botha has made many changes and we anticipate even greater change in the future -- including a sympathetic examination of the position of the urban Black.

Botha does not mince his words. Perhaps I am too optimistic, but I believe there is more hope for Blacks in South Africa now than there has been for many years.

Many people here say this is cosmetic change. But this is not so. I know that giving black workers their first full opportunity for collective bargaining is fundamental . . . not cosmetic.

Several other recent developments have encouraged me as to the future of the South African black. The report by the Wiehahn Commission, recommending that black trade unions be recognized, was in the end a major victory for the worker. Our new Minister for African Affairs, Piet Koornhof,[6] appears receptive to

[6]*Technically, Minister of Cooperation and Development. Koornhof is an interesting study. He was a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford and wrote his 1953 M.A. thesis on South Africa. In it, he says that "everything should be done to build up a stable and contented African urban population." This was the antithesis of government policy at the time and for some years access to the thesis was restricted. Subsequently, Koornhof was Secretary of the main Afrikaans cultural group F.A.K. and worked his way up rapidly in the secret Broederbond (Band of Brothers) society. Where once it was the most adamant in opposing liberalization of racial laws in South Africa, today its leadership is clearly on the verlig (enlightened) side as compared with the verkramp (cramped or conservative) side of Afrikanerdom. Piet Koornhof created at least a temporarily favorable image among some Africans when he visited the slum camp of Crossroads outside Cape Town which was scheduled to be demolished. His statement that "human problems are not solved with bulldozers" was welcomed by Africans generally. Subsequently, he has driven his own car with his wife to dine in Soweto with prominent black leaders and invited them to his home. This was unprecedented.*

the desires of the black people. He is trying to change both the government's policies and the attitudes of the white people. I have heard him challenge, "If you can have a black in your house cooking for you and caring for your children, what is wrong with standing next to one in the Post Office?"

I am also hopeful about the results of other commissions. One of my greatest longings, though, is for the day when I can cast my vote, and help choose the representative who will do the best job for me in Parliament. In the light of recent progress I believe that day is not far off.

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