

LUCY MVUBELO'S ROLE IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN TRADE UNIONS, 1960-1974 (2)

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Abstract

Lucy Mvubelo's career as one of the foremost black feminist trade union leaders stretched from 1942 to 1987. In a first article on her role in the trade unions the authors stressed the importance of her leadership qualities and her remarkable potential in establishing the SA Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) and Federation of Free African Trade Unions (FOFATUSA). During these later years of her career she remained instrumental in the development of the South African trade unions. She still worked in close cooperation with Anna Scheepers and Johanna Cornelius. Labour legislation of the apartheid government, however, hampered their work. Mvubelo nevertheless fought for the dignity of all workers. Till 1987 Mvubelo, Scheepers and Cornelius ensured that legislation was changed to give all workers the opportunity for better housing, education and equal pay for equal work. Bread-and-butter issues were of utmost importance in Mvubelo's struggle for a better dispensation for all workers. When she retired in 1987 she was regarded as instrumental in bringing about phenomenal changes in the black trade union movement. In this second article the authors focus on her role in the SA trade unions between 1960 and 1974.

Keywords: SACTU; FOFATUSA; SA trade unions; Lucy Mvubelo; Anna Scheepers; Johanna Cornelius; labour relations; equal union rights.

Slutelwoorde: SACTU; FOFATUSA; SA vakbonde; Lucy Mvubelo; Anna Scheepers; Johanna Cornelius; arbeidsverhoudinge; gelyke vakbondregte.

1. INTRODUCTION

Lucy Mvubelo's career as a feminist trade union leader was shaped from 1942 to 1959. This former teacher easily adapted to the world of trade unions and soon realised that there were many needs amongst the trade workers that urgently needed to be addressed. During her early career she never hesitated to participate in the actions to improve the interests of the workers. As early as 1947 she was involved in an effort to form a left-wing non-racial women's organisation and she were among the convenors of the first national conference of the Federation of South African Women (FSAW), the multiracial women's organisation that spearheaded the decade's massive anti-pass demonstrations. Mvubelo was the most prominent

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SA Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) activist among garment workers and was Vice-President since 1955. In November 1956, under circumstances that still remain unclear, the Executive Committee of SACTU unanimously decided to disaffiliate from the organisation. In an interview Mvubelo attributed the action to SACTU's decision to affiliate with the ANC (African National Congress); her union voted against the motion because "politics was a death-knell to us".² The alternative trade union federation, the Federation of Free African Trade Unions (FOFATUSA), which garment workers were instrumental in forming in 1959, was ostensibly aimed at keeping "trade-union activities within the bounds of worker grievances".³ Whatever the politics involved, Mvubelo did not remain totally silent on the political struggles of the decade after her break with SACTU. In 1958, for example, on the occasion of a large-scale protest, she took a strong public stand "on behalf of all the African women in my organisation who are opposed to the passes".⁴

From 1960 onwards Lucy continued her remarkable work to improve the conditions of the people who looked up to her in their struggle towards a new and better labour dispensation. She was still eager to learn and determined in her efforts to improve worker's conditions. It was Anna Scheepers and Johanna Cornelius, her elderly fellow leaders, who helped in shaping her as a skilled female trade union leader. Mvubelo kept close contact with them and was happy to regard them as her tutors and advisors in her quest to achieve the finest for SA trade workers. In this article the authors focus on Mvubelo's contributions in improving labour conditions and relations, and her determination to fight for equal union rights, better wages and recognition of all workers during 1960 to 1974. Her career in the sixties in the trade unions started with the merging of the Garment Workers Union (GWU) and the SA Clothing Workers Union (SACWU) to form the Garment Workers Union of African Women (GWU-AW).

2 Carter-Karis Collection. South African Congress of Trade Unions. Annual report and balance sheet for the year ended March 1957. Presented to the Second Annual Conference, Johannesburg, 12-14 April 1957.

3 *Ibid.*

4 Shula Marks and Stanley Trapido (eds), *The politics of race, class and nationalism in twentieth-century South Africa* (London, New York, 1987), pp. 149-155; *Golden City Post*, 23 November 1958. Cf. also Carter-Karis Collection. "Interview with Lucy Mvubelo by G.M.G., November 1973" and "The National Union of Clothing Workers: interview with Mrs Lucy Mvubelo, General Secretary". Both interviews refer to her negative views on the close relationship of FOFATUSA and the PAC (Pan-Africanist Congress).

2. THE SIXTIES AND MVUBELO'S CONTRIBUTIONS IN IMPROVING LABOUR CONDITIONS AND RELATIONS

On 17 August 1961 the first meeting of the Interim Committee for merging the GWU-AW and the SACWU was held. It was the task of this Committee to implement the decision on the merging of the two unions. This had been a very serious responsibility and the success of the merging largely depended upon the unity of this Interim Committee. The secretaries of the two unions, Mrs. V Hashe and Lucy Mvubelo, had to draft a resolution on the amalgamation of the unions. This resolution had to be considered by the shop stewards at their joint meeting on the 23rd August 1961. Mvubelo also suggested that an article had to be placed in the *Garment Worker/Klerewerker* on the improvement of the conditions of employment which the garment workers of South Africa could achieve by closer unity. It was also suggested that Hashe and Mvubelo draft a constitution for the new amalgamated union, based on the Constitution of the Garment Workers' Union of South Africa.⁵

Mvubelo suggested at this stage that Anna Scheepers and Johanna Cornelius should be permitted to hold the positions of General Secretary and President of the African union. It was explained that these two women held these honorary positions in the GWU-AW and that they received no payment for the work they had done for the GWU-AW.⁶

Despite their different conceptions of the objectives of African trade unionism, the two African unions agreed to merge. The African clothing unions merged and formed the National Union of Clothing Workers (SA) on the 1st July 1962. The sole purpose of this merging was to organise workers into one "kraal" which could eliminate the differences of opinion of previous unions. By agreement each disaffiliated from its co-ordinating body for a period of one year. In 1963, members of the NUCW were called on to vote for re-affiliation to either SACTU or FOFATUSA. The old conflicts re-emerged as the ballot gave the workers the confusing choice of joining SACTU or FOFATUSA-TUCSA, the latter being a non-existent body. Although Mvubelo's FOFATUSA won the greater number of votes, pro-SACTU workers objected and continued to constitute a solid faction within the NUCW.⁷

In 1962 Mvubelo explained that even though black unions were not recognised by law, they were not outlawed. They could still form black unions

5 Archives of the Church of the Province of South Africa, William Cullen Library, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg (Hereafter referred to as AH 1092), pp. 5-6.

6 AH 1092, Dbc 2.2, GWU Individual Unions. Labour Economy Special Topics – Border Areas 1918-1972. Report on Hammersdale organisational work by L Mvubelo and G Monare, p. 1.

7 Organize or Starve, p. 28 of 47. <<http://www.liberation-org.za/orgs/sactu/organsta06.php>>.

and could still talk to the employers. At a labour congress in Germany she told the delegates that blacks could still negotiate and agreements arrived at were taken to the full committee of the Industrial Council and such agreements then applied to all the workers in a particular industry.⁸ The only thing that one needed in South Africa, she told them, was to use some new tactics. "If one wanted to be successful, one had to be tactical; otherwise one would be a loser".⁹

According to Mvubelo the African workers in the clothing industry were the most fortunate in that they enjoyed, without discrimination, the same rights, benefits and facilities as workers of any other race. The majority of workers belonging to the NUCW-SA were grateful for the improvements in their wages and working conditions. Members had to assist in organising and educating fellow workers about the need for a strong trade union organisation to combat poverty.¹⁰

During her entire trade union career Lucy Mvubelo fought for the dignity of all workers. Like Scheepers, the President of the GWUSA, she was always trying to ensure jobs for her workers at a fair wage. Mvubelo believed that the decentralisation of secondary industry had surely brought about relief in the African areas.¹¹

Mvubelo stressed that African mothers had sacrificed their homes to be able to pay for the education of their children. Education had been a "craving" for the majority of them, because otherwise they had to work on farms, ploughing and harvesting for a mere 15 cents per day, working from dawn to dusk. The minimal wage paid in 1967, according to the Wage Determination Act of 1961, was insufficient without once being reviewed during this period. It was a disgrace to allow some employers to pay a shameful wage to their employees when the goods produced were sold on the same market as those of employers paying a decent wage.¹² The purchasing of foodstuffs and supplies had doubled the cost of living, and thus the wages at that stage were low and insufficient. Mvubelo asked: "Why not follow the example set by America?"¹³

In reports on investigations made by Mvubelo concerning wages and working conditions in rural areas, the conclusion was made that there seemed to be a lot of unhappiness and problems experienced by these workers. Employment conditions were not at all satisfactory and wages seemed to lag behind the wages prescribed by the Wage Board. Workers in the rural areas did not receive any sick benefits,

8 AH 1092, Cba 1.4.3.4, GWU Trade Unions National Union of Clothing Workers. Correspondence and papers. Address by Lucy Mvubelo. Extracts from Report of International Secretariat submitted to the Seventh World Congress—International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, Berlin, 1962 ... vide pp. 373-377. Report of Congress.

9 *Ibid.*

10 *Ibid.*

11 *Garment Worker/Klerewerker*, 21 April 1967.

12 *Ibid.*

13 *Ibid.*

female workers did not receive any confinement allowances, workers who led work stoppages were kept in custody for periods ranging from three days to three weeks. Some workers were only released after interrogations and the main reason for all the workers' grievances was that they wanted the increase in wages as promised to them. Mvubelo recommended that the registered garment trade unions had to make efforts to set up union offices which could assist workers concerning their grievances such as the forfeiture of benefits in the past through ignorance.¹⁴

On 29 January 1966 FOFATUSA officially ceased to exist. Mvubelo called a special meeting of its 12 affiliates to make the decision. They were the only remaining unions of the 20 which had originally formed FOFATUSA after its inception in 1959. In 1966 it had 13 000 affiliate members left of the 36 000 when the organisation was at its peak. Mvubelo, President of the Federation, said that it had been decided to disband because of the numerous difficulties encountered in trying to organise the African workers. She advised the remaining unions to join the Trade Union Council of South Africa (TUCSA). TUCSA, at this stage, already had African affiliate members, most of them dual members of TUCSA and FOFATUSA. Mvubelo said her federation (FOFATUSA) had been successful in organising a few industries, but its strength had weakened ever since TUCSA had opened its doors to African affiliated unions in 1962. The foundation members of FOFATUSA were the African members of the Garment Workers' Union of African Women. These members did not agree with the SACTU policy that trade unionism could be kept outside politics. Mvubelo said that although FOFATUSA at that stage still had sympathisers in many parts of the world, it felt it could "no longer continue to survive and work properly for the benefit of its members".¹⁵

A memorable day was that of the first conference of the National Union of Clothing Workers (NUCW-SA) on 19 June 1967. This young union of Mvubelo had to be nursed to its adult stage, but resolutions submitted by workers from all centres were mature and well debated, as though the workers had been in the field for a long time. Johanna Cornelius, General Secretary of the GWU-SA, presided at this momentous conference. Her inspiring speech of encouragement and advice to Mvubelo, President of the NUCW-SA, and all its members was met with loud applause.¹⁶

Anna Scheepers, President of the GWU-SA, in her greetings made a very important remark in saying that in "South Africa, being a multi-racial country,

14 AH 1092, Dbc 2.2, GWU Individual Unions–Labour Economy Special Topics–Border Areas 1918–1972. Report on investigations made at factories in the rural areas from Wednesday 15 March 1967 to Friday 17 March 1967, submitted by Lucy Mvubelo, General Secretary, 29 March 1967.

15 *Rand Daily Mail*, 29 January 1966.

16 *Ibid.*

workers of all racial groups was dependent on one another for employment and therefore close co-operation was essential and would benefit all”.

Some important resolutions were made at this conference:

- The Conference requested TUCSA to apply pressure to the authorities with regard to the recognition of African trade unions which were its affiliates.
- Another important resolution was the organising of unorganised workers. The majority of workers in industries were not, and by virtue of law could not be accepted as members in registered trade unions. The Conference requested TUCSA to use whatever influence their affiliates had to assist in their respective industries and workshops to organise African workers.
- Influx control was another important issue about which a resolution was taken at the Conference. It had brought about severe hardships to workers and had caused a high rate of crime and delinquency. The Conference therefore urged TUCSA to recommend to the authorities to zone the Witwatersrand and Vereeniging as one area, and this they believed would ease the situation of workers and their families.¹⁷

For TUCSA, however, a difficult road lay ahead. The government policy of not wanting to recognise black trade unions and all the legislation to ensure apartheid in South Africa made it very difficult to fulfil the task of a co-ordinating trade union body. TUCSA had a total membership of about 200 000 in 1966, but less than half were whites. The Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU) was the biggest single union under the TUCSA umbrella. In 1966 the AEU decided to withdraw from TUCSA. They had consistently fought for withdrawal from the co-ordinating body because TUCSA allowed African trade unions to affiliate. The AEU had, however, untiringly battled for the recognition of African trade unions and the repeal of the job reservation laws.¹⁸ The withdrawal of the AEU was seen as the greatest blow to the ideal of worker unity since the introduction of the Industrial Conciliation Act. The AEU's break with TUCSA meant that TUCSA lost more than 25 percent of its white membership.¹⁹

After investigations on the question of TUCSA's policy of organising African trade unions, it was clear that there were three main viewpoints. One section believed strongly and outspokenly that African trade unions should not be affiliated to white unions in the council. Others agreed with TUCSA's policy but said that before TUCSA would be weakened by the disaffiliation of strong and influential trade unions, separate co-ordinating councils for African workers had to be formed.

17 *Ibid.*, 28 July 1967.

18 *Ibid.*, 24 October 1967; *Rand Daily Mail*, 28 April 1966.

19 *Rand Daily Mail*, 28 April 1966.

Trade unionists supporting the third viewpoint said that they believed strongly that there had to be no compromise with principles and that all workers should be organised together.²⁰

At a special conference of TUCSA held on 12 December 1967, TUCSA's multiracial policy was discussed. It was decided to recommend that the African unions had to be excluded from membership of the council. The decision was seen in labour circles as a major triumph for the government. But the General Secretary of TUCSA, Mr JA Grobelaar, said after the conference that the decision had been taken not for the sake of the Minister but "for the sake of TUCSA". "In order that TUCSA may continue to remain the effective force it has been to date, and in an effort to maintain and increase its present affiliated strength, Conference recommends to its affiliates that membership be confined to registered trade unions."²¹ Six of the 12 African unions affiliated to TUCSA then resigned or offered to resign in a last minute bid to prevent the disintegration and possible collapse of South Africa's largest labour organisation.²²

The two African unions which threatened to resign were the National Union of Clothing Workers (NUCW-SA) and the African Tobacco Workers Union (ATWU). Mvubelu was asked to present a statement at the special conference of TUCSA, held on the 11th and 12th December 1967 on behalf of her own union, the NUCW-SA and the ATWU. Mvubelo said that as they were of the opinion that trade unions for African workers had to be recognised one day, it became essential for the growing number of blacks entering the garment industry to have the type of negotiating machinery which the free western world had accepted as the best means to govern workers' conditions.

Mvubelo stated that they regretted the SA government's policy of non-recognition of African workers because the blacks had become a permanent part of the South African labour force. She said African Garment Worker leaders would never play any part in introducing political ideologies into workers' organisations and that they totally opposed boycotts of SA because it would harm workers and SA. The SA government's endeavours to develop African homelands and border industries to provide work for blacks were welcomed provided that it did not undermine the established standards of all workers in the country. Furthermore Mvubelo said they appreciated that registered unions could negotiate on behalf of African workers and hoped this situation would continue because it contributed towards industrial peace in SA. She said, although the NUCW-SA decided to disaffiliate from TUCSA, the NUCW-SA would continue to exist simply for the purpose of trade unionism and that they had been able to fight political elements,

20 *Sunday Times*, 12 November 1967.

21 *Daily Mail*, 13 December 1967.

22 *Ibid.*, 12 December 1967.

and in this respect rendered a service to SA.²³ She believed that the decision to disaffiliate was the correct thing to do in order to save the council any further embarrassment through their continued association as unregistered trade unions with the registered trade unions of whites, brown people and Indians.²⁴

They were certain, Mvubelo continued, that TUCSA's continued existence as an influential body was only possible through the NUCW-SA's disaffiliation, and that they would have acted contrary to the spirit of trade unionism if they did not do everything in their power to keep the council going on the course it had set for itself. Unity in the workers' movement was, they believed, of paramount importance.

Mvubelo explained that the leaders of TUCSA did not reject blacks but its members did and that was why black unions started to reject TUCSA. At a conference of the Centre for Investigation into Revolutionary Activities, Mvubelo reaffirmed why TUCSA was rejected by black workers. "In 1969 the climax was so high that many white, brown and Indian unions were actually disaffiliated from TUCSA. We realised then that there was something wrong with us, probably our skin colour, which made us unacceptable. Even brown workers in the trade union movement did not accept us. So we decided that we should withdraw from TUCSA so that TUCSA could survive and speak with one voice. Since the NUCW(SA)'s affiliation to TUCSA in 1962 they found that they had been rejected by their own colleagues."²⁵

TUCSA formed two subcommittees: one was concerned with organising workers not belonging to a trade union and the other was handling African affairs. Mvubelo served on both these subcommittees. TUCSA's policy, she believed, had always been threatened by the law in South Africa, but it kept its head high, and its principles were purely based on trade unionism.²⁶

In 1968 the South African garment trade unions received the good news that they had been given a seat on the General Council of the International Textile and Garment and Leather Workers' Federation (ITGLWF). Mvubelo wrote a letter in compliance to the ITGLWF's circular on the nomination of a representative for the General Council and Executive Committee of this Federation. She said it was a pleasure to inform the ITGLWF that NUCW-SA had nominated Ms Anna Scheepers, President of the GWU of SA, to serve on the General Council and Executive Committee of the ITGLWF.

History was made in 1968 as Scheepers was the first and only representative from the African continent and the first and only woman who served on this

23 AH 1092, Cba 1.4.3.5, Organisation of the Clothing Workers. NUCW 1965-1977. Correspondence statement submitted by Ms L Mvubelo of the NUCW-SA at the special conference of the Trade Union Council of South Africa, pp. 1-2.

24 *Ibid.*

25 Konferensie oor Vakbondwese in SA. Rewolusie of vrede? 1 October 1984, p. 21.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 22.

international governing body. Her appointment enjoyed the united support of the South African affiliated unions which had a membership in excess of 75 000 workers.²⁷

It is clear that a good relationship existed between Anna Scheepers and Lucy Mvubelo. In February 1969 TUCSA finally made the decision to exclude African trade unions from membership. The delegates at the Conference adopted the decision placed before them by the National Executive Committee to limit the membership to registered trade unions. Mvubelo said this decision of TUCSA to amend its constitution to exclude African trade union affiliation, served to ripen the fear of the African worker that his/her future job and income security had an aura of doubt about it. There was a feeling that this decision was the crystal ball of his/her fate, and it did not prognosticate anything too desirable.²⁸

Mvubelo, as General Secretary of the NUCW, pointed out that members believed the NUCW had to be dissolved, and that they should discontinue their subscriptions to the union. "The dissemination of this belief would be detrimental to our organisation",²⁹ Mvubelo stated. "Garment workers in the clothing industry should be very clear that their present working conditions are the fruits of 50 years of activity. African employees in the clothing industry have been granted the same benefits as the industry's white and brown labour force, and the prescribed wages have no racial classification."³⁰

According to Mvubelo the workers of the NUCW-SA were fortunate to have a co-operative relationship with the Garment Workers' Union of South Africa (GWUSA), which was one of the most powerful and progressive trade unions in the Republic. She also told her union's workers that the GWUSA had been responsible for the organisation of workers in a number of other related and unrelated industries and has led to the existence of the Cigarette and Tobacco Workers' Union; Sweet Workers' Union; Broom and Brush Workers' Union; Hotel Bar and Catering Union; Biscuit Making Union; and later the Textile Workers' Union and the Radio, Television, Electronic and Allied Workers' Union. It has further helped to establish several others.³¹

The African workers in 1969 felt that if registered trade unions negotiated on their behalf and the rate for the job became applicable, not only would they enjoy proper protection by law, but employers would not be able to undercut wages of their colleagues in other racial groups.³²

27 *Garment Worker/Klerewerker*, 22 November 1968.

28 *Ibid.*, 14 March 1969.

29 *Ibid.*

30 *Ibid.*

31 *Ibid.*

32 *Ibid.*, 5 December 1969.

3. **MVUBELO DETERMINED TO FIGHT FOR EQUAL RIGHTS, WAGES AND RECOGNITION OF ALL WORKERS (1970-1974)**

Lucy Mvubelo believed trade unionism and collective bargaining should be the right of all workers and not confined to certain racial groups. She said that South Africa had become the most industrialised country on the African continent and formed the bulk of the work force due to economic demands and requirements.³³

Mvubelo was concerned about the government's statement on the question of suspension of industrial agreements and wage determinations for homelands. She felt very strongly that labour affairs lie within the scope of the Department of Labour. If agreements and determinations were suspended, what protection was left for the worker in the homeland and what protection would the urban workers enjoy? She believed that such a step would jeopardise the prospects of workers in the cities in obtaining higher wages and better conditions of employment, and furthermore there would be no job security for them.³⁴

In a statement to the Minister of Labour by the NUCW-SA, Mvubelo stated that the situation was not as it was reported in the daily press, namely that African workers were replacing European workers. This was entirely false and misleading as many black workers had been retrenched as well. The root of the whole problem, Mvubelo stressed, was the unfair competition coming from the rural areas against the controlled areas and thereby depriving the latter of a great volume of their business, and thus necessitating the lessening of their workers.³⁵ She further stated that as a trade union movement the NUCW-SA had never stood for sectional interests of the workers. They appreciated the fact that all workers had to earn their livelihood by selling their labour. To prevent any further deterioration of the labour conditions resulting in unemployment in controlled areas, factories in rural areas had to be compelled by legislation to pay living wages and not a mere pittance as they had been doing.³⁶

In the 1970s, however, African workers through a series of strikes and other forms of work stoppages demonstrated that their power on the factory floor would force a political transformation. Early in 1970, the General Secretary of the GWU-SA, Hester Cornelius, requested the Commissioner of Bantu Affairs to issue a passport to the General Secretary of the NUCW-SA, Lucy Mvubelo, to attend the

33 *Ibid.*

34 *Ibid.*

35 AH 1092, Cba 1.4.1, GWU Organisation in the Clothing Industry. NUCW 1953-1962. GWU of African Women, Statement prepared by the GWU of African Women and the SACWU Trade Unions catering for the interests of African female and African male workers in the consideration of the Minister of Labour on the recent retrenchment of workers at Germiston Clothing Factory, Germiston, p. 2.

36 *Ibid.*, pp. 3 and 4.

International Labour Organization (ILO) Conference in Geneva in June 1970, as an observer. Cornelius wrote that Mvubelo opposed any politics in trade unions. She would be a true ambassador for South Africa at the Conference, where vicious anti-South African attacks would be launched. Moreover: she was well known in government circles for her pro-South African views and should be assisted by government so that she could continue with her good work.

The fact that Mvubelo was granted permission by the South African government to travel across the world, caused many black trade unions to wrongly believe that Mvubelo was supporting apartheid and was a “sell-out” of the black trade unions.³⁷

She concluded her address by saying that every new factory built, every additional kilometre of railway, every bale of clothing made, brought the races closer together in South Africa, and helped to take a small step away from the prison of poverty, and assisted the races to be less frightened of change.³⁸

In Miami, Florida, Mvubelo attended the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union Convention, the highlight of her trip to the USA. She addressed the meeting and received a standing ovation. She said she could learn a great deal from the Americans because they, like the South Africans, had been faced and were still facing problems of a multicultural country. She said that developments at that stage were definitely in favour of the African worker being trained for higher skilled jobs and being remunerated accordingly. She concluded her speech by saying: “I am convinced that the value of economic considerations will in the near future supersede negative ideological considerations. The day, I am sure, will dawn in the next decade that people will be judged on merit and not on the colour of their skin.”³⁹

The wisdom of her approach was recalled on her return to South Africa. The Coca Cola Corporation in the USA had asked for her advice regarding to what must be done for African workers. The company was obviously concerned about the pressure brought to bear on American companies who made profits in South Africa, and had wisely requested guidance from a top African leader. This event marked an important historical occasion for African workers.⁴⁰

Change was very slowly taking place in South Africa and part of that process was an increased awareness on the part of the Europeans and Americans that they could not do it alone and that they require the advice and guidance of the African,

37 AH 1092, Cba 1.4.3.4, GWU Trade Unions. NUCW correspondence and papers. Hester Cornelius, General Secretary of the GWUSA–Commissioner of Bantu Affairs, 25 May 1970.

38 *Ibid.*

39 AH 1092, Cba 1.4.3.4, GWU Trade Unions. NUCW correspondence and papers. Address by Lucy Mvubelo, General Secretary of the NUCW-SA, delivered to the Convention of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union, Hotel Fountainbleau, Miami Beach, Florida, 8 to 14 May 1971, p. 1.

40 *Ibid.*

brown and Indian leaders in solving their problems. It was for this reason that Mvubelo advised American companies on their labour policies.

Before her return to South Africa, Mvubelo also went to Europe and visited the ILO where she held discussions with the Director General, and called on the National Union of Tailors and Garment Workers in Britain. Mvubelo said that the people of Great Britain were greatly interested in the South African people's attempt to come to grips and resolve what was (and still is!) a great world problem, namely race relations.⁴¹

From what Mvubelo said in her address about race relations in South Africa, it is clear that she was optimistic that in future a solution for the problem would be found. She stressed that the changes in the tone and tempo of urban white thinking would have a great influence on the future socio-economic conditions of the black workers of South Africa. While these great sociological changes within the white thinking in the cities were not at that stage extensively reflected in the policies and utterances of the political leaders, the politics in South Africa soon had to catch up with the attitudes of the white public, and when that happened the blacks would have a new deal and experience the removal of some of the barriers to economic equality.⁴² Mvubelo continued by saying that the rest of the world had a role to play in the Southern African drama.

Back home from her overseas tour Mvubelo told the reporter of the *Garment Worker/Klerewerker* that economic sanctions and boycotts against South Africa were wrong. It would only harm the black people they aimed to help the most. It was only capital investments in South Africa that would help the blacks, Mvubelo believed.⁴³ The information that could be found on Mvubelo's 1971 overseas visits for this research clearly proves that Mvubelo had always been a good ambassador for South Africa. She tried to paint South Africa's image as bright and positive as possible.

In 1971 the NUCW-SA once again proved the saying, "united we stand, divided we fall", to be true. They went through a terrible crisis. Disrupters of the union tried their utmost to smash the NUCW-SA which had been built on a solid foundation by their leaders, Anna Scheepers and Johanna Cornelius, President and General Secretary respectively. Mvubelo stated that these persons were stalwart leaders of trade unionism in South Africa. They had sacrificed their leisure and pleasure to uplift the black workers.⁴⁴

In a letter from Scheepers to Mvubelo, the former stated that it had always been a pleasure to serve the African workers, the same as if they had been members

41 *Garment Worker/Klerewerker*, 6 August 1971.

42 *Ibid.*

43 *Ibid.*, 18 June 1971.

44 AH 1092, DbA 1.4.3.4, GWU Trade Union NUCW-SA. Correspondence and papers. Letter to Garment Workers in the clothing industry, 4 March 1971; *Garment Worker/Klerewerker*, 3 December 1971.

of the GWUSA. Scheepers wrote, “It is only the legal position that separates us, but I am pleased that in spirit we are one.” Scheepers wanted the NUCW-SA to be strengthened as they all wanted to prove that African unions could be as strong industrial organisations as other trade unions. She wanted the NUCW-SA to serve as a symbol and an example which other African workers would follow.⁴⁵

In an article in the *Financial Mail* of 17 March 1972, it was stated that the NUCW-SA under the leadership of Mvubelo, had probably become as effective as it was possible for an African union to be within the setup at that time.⁴⁶

In a Dutch newspaper, *Jan Zorgdrager*, a reporter wrote the following about Scheepers and Mvubelo, “Ook Anna Scheepers gelooft niet in Apartheid. Daarom heft ook zij gesorgd voor gelijke arbeidsvoorwaarden in haar bedrijfstakken. Daarom loop zij zich het vuur uit de sloffen voor een gelijk waardige gezondheidszorg en opleiding voor haar zwarte pupillen. In hetzelfde gebouw als haar bond zetelt de bond van Lucy Mvubelo, de bond van Bantoe-werknemers in de textile- en kledingsindustrie. Lucy mag niet onderhandelen; dat doet Anna (Scheepers) Maar in haar bond worden geen beslissingen genomen zonder dat Lucy en haar medebestuurders daarin volledig hebben meegespeeld.”⁴⁷ According to this Dutch reporter Scheepers did everything possible to promote the black trade union of Mvubelo and guided and supported the latter to build a trade union for all workers, irrespective of race, to be proud of.

At the annual conference of the Trade Union Council of SA (TUCSA) held in August 1972, it was once again realised that white workers could not protect themselves in industry forever unless the black worker was also protected. TUCSA decided in favour of admitting South Africa’s 5,5 million African workers to the fold of registered trade unionism. With this decision TUCSA – that compromised at this stage of 68 affiliated unions representing 194 000 brown, white and Indian workers in industry – stood committed to the idea of sharing all trade union rights with the bulk of the country’s workers, the Africans. In 1961 there were 30 per cent blacks in the manufacturing industry. By 1967 the picture had changed to 25 per cent white and 75 per cent black and in 1971 the figure stood at 23 per cent white and 77 per cent black. The writing was on the wall.⁴⁸

TUCSA, it seemed, was partly motivated by the old South African reality – fear. But in TUCSA the fear was tempered by realism. Instead of choosing the dictum “divide and rule”, which no longer worked in industry anyway, TUCSA had chosen the philosophy of “unite and survive”.

45 AH 1092, GWU NUCW-SA, Cba 1.4.3.4. Correspondence and papers. Letter Anna Scheepers–General Secretary and Executive Committee, NUCW-SA, 30 August 1972.

46 *Financial Mail*, 17 March 1972.

47 *Zorgdrager Jan*, “Tweemaal Scheepers. Opmerkelijke figuren in Zuidafrikaanse vakbeweging (Twice Scheepers. Outstanding persons in South African trade unions)”, 18 October 1972, p. 5.

48 *Cape Times*, 28 August 1972.

An “official plan” for certain trade union rights for African workers, put forward by Dr Piet van der Merwe, economics professor and member of the Bantu Affairs Commission, which obviously had government backing, had also been announced. This so-called blueprint for African trade unionism was put forward at TUCSA's annual conference. TUCSA found the proposals unacceptable.⁴⁹

Mvubelo reacted that she could with certain reservations see merit in the plan. She concluded her comment on Van der Merwe's blueprint by saying: “By all means, let there be acceptable minimum wage scales for all workers, but the government must not expect, in terms of Van der Merwe's plan, that there can be any substitute for African trade unions in the urban area for a particular industry or a works committee in a large company.”⁵⁰

Delegates at TUCSA's annual conference wasted no time in condemning the plan. It did not pass the test of creating genuine democratic trade unions, they said. Furthermore, it bristled with practical difficulties. Not only TUCSA found the proposals unacceptable. “This plan will also create unexpected consequences”, Mvubelo said.⁵¹

During the course of 1972, the first full-scale election by national ballot of union leaders and executive committees of the National Union of Clothing Workers (SA) took place. It was the first election of this kind that was held since the amalgamation in 1962 of the men's en women's unions. Mvubelo was re-elected as General Secretary of NUCW-SA by an overwhelming majority of members. Unfortunately the momentous task of conducting the election was made even more difficult by a dissenting group of members who tried to delay the completion of the elections as long as possible.⁵²

During 1972 NUCW-SA experienced some terrifying events. Thug methods were employed in an effort to capture the unions. Numerous summonses were issued against NUCW-SA members. Even Mvubelo was charged with theft of union funds, but was acquitted by the court.⁵³ Daily demonstrations and storming of the union offices by misled groups of members were organised. These members demanded, on the spot, huge sums of money as loans from the Loan Fund, ignoring the usual rules of procedure.

Members were pressurised not to participate in the elections. False rumours were spread and scurrilous pamphlets distributed against officials of NUCW-SA, as well as against those of the Garment Workers' Union of South Africa. “However, all

49 *Financial Mail*, 1 September 1972.

50 *Garment Worker/Klerewerker*, 1 September 1973.

51 *Ibid.*

52 *Ibid.*, 4 August 1972.

53 *The World*, 23 June 1972; AH 1092, GWU-NUCW. Correspondence and papers. Letter Mvubelo–Mr M Zimmerman (Legal Advisor of the GWUSA). Acquittal from theft brought by Mr J Mathe against Ms L Mvubelo.

these un-trade union-live activities have failed, thanks to the loyalty and devotion of the members and my colleagues in furthering the principles which our workers' movement stands for", Mvubelo remarked.⁵⁴

In a letter titled "Living in fear" some of the office bearers of NUCW-SA however added that the quarterly financial report of the General Secretary, Mvubelo, had never been submitted since 1962, despite their persistent demands. These statements made by the NUCW's office bearers clearly prove that the administration of the NUCW-SA experienced serious problems.⁵⁵

After a court action which was instituted by the state against two employees of the NUCW-SA in connection with a R311 subscription fee which was allegedly not paid into the NUCW's coffers, Mvubelo testified that she had not kept a personal record of the monies received on behalf of the union. She said it was impossible for a general secretary of any large trade union, particularly one with 14 000 members, to keep a personal record of each contribution received. Mvubelo said that on discovery by the auditors that there appeared to be a shortfall in the funds of the union, the matter was referred to the appropriate authorities, and the Garment Workers' Union of SA was approached for advice. This union undertook to open a separate account for monies of the National Union, paid in on the written authority of individual members. Mvubelo advised members of her union to give their mandate to the GWU-SA which administered their subscriptions with great care, until the handling of finances of the NUCW-SA could be re-organised.⁵⁶

In the midst of the administrative problems of the NUCW-SA the GWU-SA requested a meeting of the Industrial Council to consider a wage rise for 24 000 workers, 17 000 of whom were Africans. The workers were becoming impatient as the prices of goods were increasing daily and many of them were taking the position in their own hands and were pressurising their employers for wage increases. Mvubelo said they had no fear of any work stoppages in any of the industries for which the two unions, the GWU-SA and NUCW-SA, aimed to obtain wage increases.⁵⁷

In February 1973, 50 000 workers went on strike in Natal. Mvubelo stated that the government and employers had to make provisions for the recognition of their African workers as an integral part of the employee labour force rather than dividing the workers into racial groups.⁵⁸

Mvubelo continued by stating that in spite of many obstacles confronting black workers through not having direct representations to their management,

54 *Garment Worker/Klerewerker*, 4 August 1972.

55 AH 1092, Cba 1.4.3.4, GWU Trade Union NUCW. Correspondence and papers. Letter from NUCW office bearers (not dated) to their fellow workers, s.a.

56 *Garment Worker/Klerewerker*, 5 March 1971.

57 *Ibid.*, 2 March 1973.

58 *Ibid.*, 23 March 1973.

blacks had been successful in negotiations, but only where they had brought pressure to bear upon their employers. The achievements of the Central Labour Board which in the past had permitted the low wages under which the black workers were labouring were unacceptable. "Therefore, African workers prefer to be represented by their union", Mvubelo added.⁵⁹

Black attitudes towards improvement of productivity were proved by the increased production where incentive bonus schemes had been introduced. As with all other groups of workers a shorter workweek, extra paid holidays, longer paid annual leave, promotion, good relations and fringe benefits would have marked effect on job satisfaction. However, Mvubelo said that these benefits would not stop wage demands, particularly from workers who were living on earnings which kept them perpetually in poverty.⁶⁰

In the then Transvaal (Gauteng), where hundreds of thousands of black workers were employed, hardly any went on strike. The reason for this was that wages in general were higher. In Natal the African worker had to provide for himself in the city and for his wife and children in the homeland. In the clothing industry in Transvaal, Africans were covered by the Industrial Council agreements that provided yearly increases. The African workers belonged to the NUCW-SA which had direct access to the Industrial Council, whose agents took up each complaint.

In April 1973, Mvubelo addressed students of the University of the Witwatersrand on the question: "No white officials or African trade unions represent African workers?" In a devastating attack on the operation of the Bantu Labour (Settlements of Disputes) Act Mvubelo said that until then, African workers had heard nothing from the Regional Bantu Labour Committee. She said they were certainly not representing the African workers in the clothing industry. They were just stopping progress for African workers.⁶¹

Mvubelo declared that the number of trade unions were growing. The works committees which the government wanted were totally ineffective Mvubelo told the students, because: They could not negotiate with management on an industry-wide basis; they did not meet regularly; the top management did not come to the meetings; the members of works committees were often victimized; there was no established procedure for workers to hear what their representatives had decided at the meetings; and there was no opportunity for education of the workers' representatives.

If evidence was needed to prove that Africans did not want works committees, even under the best employers, it could be found in the fact that in the 18 years after

59 *Ibid.*

60 *Ibid.*

61 *Ibid.*, 23 March and 27 April 1973.

the Act had been passed, there were only 28 works committees, and in 20 years there were only 18 in operation.⁶²

As a result of the Natal strikes of some 65 000 black workers early in February 1973, the then Minister of Labour, Marais Viljoen, announced that he had instructed the Wage Board to investigate and make new recommendations for five unskilled wage determinations. The Trade Union Council of SA set up an *ad hoc* committee to submit evidence to the Wage Board. The Committee, under chairmanship of Professor SP Cilliers (Sociology) included businessmen and academics as well as trade unionists. Mvubelo was amongst the 13 persons on the Committee.

The Committee submitted an important written memorandum which challenged some of the assumptions in terms of which the Wage Board had, in the past, made recommendations. The Wage Board asked that besides written memoranda, oral evidence had to be given. Evidence was also given by the *ad hoc* committee of TUCSA, of which Mvubelo was a member. She stated that Africans needed high wages to increase their standard of living.

Mr Tindale, Chairman of the Wage Board, had to be congratulated, Mvubelo said, on having allowed all interested parties to have a say. The presence of more than 200 African workers, coming from a factory manufacturing salt, and also abattoir workers, was unusual. Moreover: It was a victory for democracy and anti-racist groups that all interested parties had a say, no matter what the colour of their skins was.⁶³

Another important decision that had to be taken by Mvubelo and her unions was whether medical benefits had to be extended to children and other dependants of garment workers. If benefits were to be extended then contributions would have to be increased.⁶⁴ Fortunately Mvubelo received some good news that as from 1st October 1973, the NUCW-SA would receive increased death benefits from their funeral scheme, the Home Trust Life Group Family Funeral Scheme, without paying higher premiums. She said that this once again proved that union is strength.⁶⁵

But an increase in the cost of living affected other needs of workers' benefit funds. The amount of sick pay, for example, a worker received had not increased for ten years (1963-1973). The employers had gained at the expense of the workers. Since 1965, wages had gone up but contributions to the various benefit funds had hardly gone up by a few cents. Unless an escalation clause to increase wages automatically as the cost of living rose was written into agreements, workers would find it hard to achieve an increase in their standard of living. Unless the

62 *Ibid.*

63 *Ibid.*

64 *Ibid.*, 9 June 1972.

65 *Ibid.*, 5 October 1973.

contributions to the various benefit funds were made a percentage of earnings, the quality of life of workers would deteriorate.⁶⁶

GWUSA and NUCW-SA were determined to tackle these issues for the 1974 agreement. Trade unionism was not only concerned with wage rates but also with fringe benefits and most important, training facilities. Mvubelo, General Secretary of the 18 000 strong NUCW-SA, said her union would never have been able to operate if it had not brought in all the workers and if certain low-skilled categories were excluded from membership. If certain workers did not understand trade unionism, then the task of the union was to educate them on the importance of the union.⁶⁷

In June 1973 GWUSA and NUCW-SA and employer organisations were trying to make sure their voice would be heard at the International Labour Organization (ILO), which took place in Geneva, Switzerland. At this conference particular attention was paid to labour in South Africa. Interest in South Africa centred around the report of the Director General on apartheid in labour. A two-day conference was held during the middle of the conference to discuss action which could be taken against apartheid.⁶⁸ South Africa had withdrawn from the ILO in 1964. Usually TUCSA had an observer at the ILO conferences and employers retained their membership of the ILO of Employers, which was the official employer group at the ILO. But in 1973, both employers and trade unions were making a special effort to have the maximum representation possible.⁶⁹

Mvubelo was asked by the officials to stand down after South African trade unionists had won her the right to speak at the conference. Later a unanimous resolution was passed calling on governments to sever political, cultural, commercial and diplomatic relations with South Africa and to stop public and private investments. The resolution called on all trade union organisations:

- To oppose emigration of skilled labour to South Africa.
- To bring pressure on economic and financial groups which collaborate with South Africa.
- To boycott the loading and unloading of goods from South Africa and/or South West Africa (Namibia) and South African ships and planes.

Denouncing apartheid as “inhuman”, the resolution requested the UN to make sanctions against South Africa mandatory. It said that South Africa denied African workers the most basic human rights.⁷⁰ Mvubelo was the 48th speaker at the

66 *Ibid.*, 3 August 1973.

67 *Ibid.*, 17 July 1973.

68 *Ibid.*, 15 June 1973.

69 *Ibid.*, 22 June 1973.

70 *Ibid.*, 29 June 1973.

Congress. What she actually wanted to say was contained in her written statement, which partly appears hereunder:

“I have to contend daily with the problems of workers under the apartheid system. I am not fortunate enough to look at these problems from outside South Africa or from a position of safety and distance. This is why I can speak with sincerity, feeling and authority, because I am there and not somewhere else. For years, I have heard all the arguments, the proposals and suggestions for removing the ‘apartheid’ system and I must express my doubts as to whether what has until now been suggested, is either desirable or effective for me or my fellow African workers in South Africa.”⁷¹

Mvubelo said that any programme and action for the elimination of “apartheid” and the improvement of the black workers’ condition of life had to be jointly planned by active South African trade unionists and resident South African workers. These would be the only effective ways for bringing change and to eliminate the apartheid system. She begged the international world not to isolate South Africa.

Mvubelo continued by saying: “I appeal to our trade union colleagues not to make the task of the black people of South Africa more difficult by asking for withdrawal of these companies from South Africa, or boycotting South African goods. We are against apartheid, but do not make the life of black workers, brown people and Indians unbearable by throwing them out of work.”⁷² She invited the ILO Workers’ Committee to visit South Africa and to form a dialogue with non-racist SA trade union bodies.

As already stated in this article, trade unions and their co-ordinating bodies constantly clashed with the government of South Africa and the Minister of Labour because of South Africa’s policy of separate development and the legislation that hampered equality within trade unions. The leaders of TUCSA, elected to the Officers’ Committee and National Executive Committee (NEC) for the year 1973-1974, had an important task in policy formation. In a strongly-worded resolution by the NEC, they expressed their lack of confidence in the Minister for his failure to provide adequate legislation in regard to the rights of African workers.⁷³

It is no wonder that Mvubelo remained a TUCSA supporter. She really believed that only trade union rights, as she received as a member of the parallel union of the GWUSA, and better wages would help the worker and not boycotts and sanctions against South Africa as preached by SACTU. TUCSA’s policy as laid

71 *Ibid.*, 31 August 1973.

72 *Ibid.*

73 *Ibid.*

down in its constitution and reaffirmed time and again was “to strive for a better life for all the people of South Africa, as also the people everywhere”.⁷⁴

It was not only internationally, but also in South Africa, that Mvubelo spoke out for the workers. In an address delivered on the 12th of September 1973, at the inaugural meeting of the “Verligte Aksie” (Enlightened Action) in Cape Town, Mvubelo said: “We are all South Africans and we all want our place in the sun. Together we can achieve it.”⁷⁵

Mvubelo continued her address by saying that the African workers wanted to have what their white fellow workers already had. They wanted to be able to gain education to acquire skills so that they could achieve promotions according to their ability and to earn a living wage.⁷⁶

In September 1973, the Garment Workers' Union of South Africa held its No. 1 and No. 2 branches' divisional council meetings. Mvubelo of the NUCW-SA was invited as guest speaker. She spoke to a packed hall, consisting mostly of a European audience. Her message for them was that the time had come for black people to be recognised as much as white people. “The present economic and political structure as it affects the African workers is indefensible. It has brought little benefit to them. We are the underprivileged, the ones who suffer from poverty, frustration and despair in the country of our birth”, she said.⁷⁷

At the multiracial banquet held in Johannesburg in 1974, 25 outstanding women of all races in South Africa were honoured by bestowing on them honorary life presidency of the Federation of Business and Professional Women. Mvubelo was the only trade unionist to receive the honour. This honour was well deserved. She received the title in recognition of her trade union activities. This was a milestone in the career of a woman who started as a sewing machinist in a Johannesburg clothing factory and who in 1973 was the General Secretary of a strong African trade union with some 18 000 members, of whom 6 000 were men.⁷⁸ Mvubelo's outstanding service rendered in 1973 was her courageous stand at the ILO conference in Geneva, Switzerland, in June 1973 which brought her great public acclaim as an ambassador for South Africa.

The year 1974 was a difficult and sad year for all garment workers in South Africa, marked particularly by the tragic loss of Johanna Cornelius, the General

74 *Ibid.*

75 AH 1426, Ab 4.2. 1969-1971. TUCSA (National Organisation correspondence with individual unions. Affiliation and unions). An address delivered by Lucy Mvubelo, General Secretary of the NUCW-SA, Inaugural meeting, Verligte Aksie, Western Cape Area, 12th September 1973, Cape Town, p. 1.

76 *Ibid.*

77 *Garment Worker/Klerewerker*, 21 September 1973.

78 *Ibid.*

Secretary of the GWU-SA.⁷⁹ In a letter extending her sympathy and condolences for the passing of Cornelius, Mvubelo *inter alia* wrote: “She nursed us through our most difficult and unendurable days, when one expected the black union to go to shackles. She stood for what is right and not for who is right.”⁸⁰

Mvubelo was guided by Cornelius and Anna Scheepers through their knowledge and experience as trade union leaders. These two women sometimes differed from Mvubelo and did have their quarrels, but in general they supported her where they could. They were also very proud of her achievements internationally as ambassador for the workers of South Africa and were glad that she also received recognition in South Africa for what she had achieved for workers.⁸¹

NUCW-SA under the leadership of Mvubelo was held up as an example of African workers effectively operating their union. Part of the success was due to the fact that employers recognised the union and deals with the shop stewards, the elected leaders of the workers of the factory.

In July 1974 Mvubelo addressed the Institute for Study of Man in Africa – on “Trade unionism in South Africa” in Johannesburg. She said that the NUCW-SA’s survival was solely the responsibility of the registered GWU-SA, and other industries should follow the pattern of this union. Mvubelo added that Africans had emerged from the master-servant stage and adapted themselves to the Western civilisation type of living and that was why they started clamouring for opportunities available to other racial groups.⁸²

A leading trade unionist said, after the Durban strikes in 1973, that a new consensus had resulted among urban whites that on average the African was paid too little, that the industrial machinery for them was inadequate, and that a respect for the African workers and their grievances had resulted. Mvubelo said that if this was a general reaction and agreement among whites, then a constructive step forward had been taken and the prospects for black workers would be brighter.

Black diplomats were given the social freedom of South Africa; white cabinet ministers attended cocktail parties along with South African blacks. At industrial level some white trade unionists rejected job reservation as a means to ensure harmony between workers of different races, and some firms announced their intention of raising wages to the poverty datum line. South African society was said to be in a state of flux, and even some of the most hardened opponents of apartheid acknowledged that important changes were taking place.

79 *Ibid.*

80 *Ibid.*

81 *Ibid.*, 1 March 1974.

82 AH 1092, GWU/NUCW-SA 1972-1975. Correspondence and paper. Address by Lucy Mvubelo, Institute for Study of Man in Africa – “Trade unionism in South Africa”, Johannesburg, 16 July 1974.

The GWU-SA, when submitting its proposals in January 1974, stated it was the desire that the NUCW-SA representatives, who were representing 80% of the work force in the industry, should participate in informal negotiations. The principle that blacks could even attend Industrial Council meetings was accepted.⁸³

For South Africa this working together of whites and blacks around the negotiating table was a unique situation. Mvubelo said it should have been possible for industrialists to carbon copy the achievements of the GWU-SA and the NUCW-SA. This was a change which should have been accepted by the government and the people who had the right to vote. She rightly said that the world was in an era of change.⁸⁴

In 1974 the annual conference of TUCSA also witnessed important changes. TUCSA had changed its constitution to allow African unions or federations to affiliate to it. Mvubelo attended the annual TUCSA conference at UNISA in 1974 as an observer and she asked TUCSA: "Why did you not consult us"? Her cry from the heart was far more than a constitutional amendment, but a genuine willingness to recognise African trade unions for what they are. She pointed out that African unions were operating, they had a sound administrative system, they had experienced officials, therefore their voice had to be heard and their views recognised.⁸⁵

When the delegates at the TUCSA conference realised that the mere changing of a constitution was not enough, steps were taken to demonstrate the good faith of the TUCSA unions by suggesting that positive action be taken. A policy statement was put to conference, and unanimously adopted, wherein it was agreed that TUCSA would hold discussions with the African trade unions. The purpose of these discussions would be to establish exactly what the views and aspiration of known and existing *bona fide* African unions were.⁸⁶

When the delegates of the Workers' Committee of the ILO in 1974 refused to consider giving Mvubelo an opportunity to address the meeting, the delegates representing the American Federation of Labour and Congress of Industrial Organisations (AFL-CIO) on the working committee of the ILO supported her request to address the meeting. They said that the delegates who had denied Mvubelo to speak were also denying the principles of trade unionism. The reason for their refusal was that Mvubelo had not been officially credited as an observer by the then Organisation of African Unity.

At this stage the British Trade Union Congress (TUC) wanted to help build an African labour movement in South Africa. TUC's plan was aimed at helping

83 *Ibid.*

84 *Garment Worker/Klerewerker*, 29 November 1974.

85 *Ibid.*, 31 May 1974.

86 *Ibid.*

South African workers and they did not want to include involvement in politics. The plan involved collecting a large sum of money from trade unions in European countries and giving it to organisations in South Africa involved in helping African workers establish trade unions. Mvubelo and Jane Bades, General Secretary of the 14 000 strong Engineering and Allied Workers' Union, also attended the conference of the International Metal Workers Federation in Stockholm. Bades attended the week-long conference as a delegate, whereas Mvubelo had been invited to attend as an observer. By attending all these international conferences Mvubelo really acted as an ambassador for South Africa and she succeeded in building international bridges.⁸⁷

In 1974 the international world's view of South Africa was very negative. When the GWU of SA was invited to attend the ITGLWF (International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers' Federation) it was regarded as an inspiration for all workers of South Africa and a big breakthrough in the labour field. Unfortunately for the South Africans, because of campaigns of organisations engaged in the struggle to bring about a change in the policy of separate development (apartheid) practised in South Africa, delegates were refused permits to enter Nigeria and all hopes of representation from South Africa were shattered.⁸⁸ Thus the time of action had arrived.

The 23 000-member NUCW-SA under the leadership of Mvubelo challenged the minister to say why he could not register NUCW-SA in terms of the Industrial Conciliation Act. In an 11-page memorandum that Mvubelo and her union submitted to the government, she said there were only 900 white workers but 19 427 African workers in the Transvaal clothing industry. In 1973, NUCW-SA had 97 per cent membership in the Transvaal clothing industry, 100 per cent membership in the Northern Cape and the Free State clothing industry, and 88 per cent in the knitting industry.

Amongst the most important facts Mvubelo pointed out in the memorandum was that:

- Legal registration (in terms of the Industrial Conciliation Act) would enable the union to negotiate directly with employers and empower it to discipline its members like registered unions could.
- Elected union leaders were in a better position to represent the workers than government officials because they enjoyed the confidence of their members and could persuade them to accept a compromise statement.
- International opposition to South Africa would be countered if black unions were given official recognition.

87 *Ibid.*, 31 August 1973 and 19 July 1974.

88 *Ibid.*, 29 November 1974.

- “The crux of the matter”, Mvubelo and NUCW-SA said, “is that we are recognised in the majority of areas where a union can be recognised, but not in terms of equal representation with employers on the industrial councils.”⁸⁹

The issues facing South Africa in 1974 were no longer that change had to come. Changes in many spheres had already been brought about. The challenge then facing South Africa, and in particular the trade union movement, was how to control and direct the changes and channel the expectations of the people. For too long the urban Africans had been left out of the decision-making process affecting their lives. This was why African workers, through leaders like Mvubelo, could no longer be left out of the industrial council system, or be prevented to form joint bodies with employers where none existed.⁹⁰

Although Mvubelo and her union's request for legal recognition had once again been declined by the government, NUCSW-SA and GWU-SA were even more determined to fight for equal union rights, wages and recognition for all workers.⁹¹ All the garment unions belonged to the International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers' Federation. With the advent of multinational companies it became essential that the trade union movement should also operate on a worldwide level.

It is no wonder that Mvubelo and the representatives of GWU-SA were highly perturbed about the Affected Organisations Bill. This Bill was aimed at organisations which not only received money from organisations in other countries, but also moral support from abroad. This was a bad blow for NUCW-SA. Not only was there exchange of information through the international federation, but also support for the struggles of sister unions who had to defend their right to speak on behalf of workers against discrimination and other malpractices of employers. Furthermore, the contact with South African trade unionists at the regular conferences brought understanding of South Africa's problems. This Bill harmed the relationship between trade unions like NUCW-SA and their international trade secretaries.⁹²

In response to a letter from the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICTFU) asking for more information as to the best means in which ICTFU could assist the African workers in South Africa, Mvubelo responded as follows: “It remains my opinion that the best form of assistance that ICFTU, or any other organisation for that matter which wants to assist us here, would be that of helping

89 *Ibid.*

90 *Ibid.*

91 AH 1092, Cba 1.4.3.4. NUCW-SA 1972-1975. Correspondence and papers. Letter Private Secretary of Minister Marais Viljoen–Lucy Mvubelo (General Secretary of the NUCW-SA), 30 December 1974.

92 *Garment Worker/Klerewerker*, 8 March 1974.

in educating the workers in trade unionism, and in educating them to become efficient trade unionists.”

Mvubelo said that it had always surprised her that ICFTU wanted to isolate the trade union movement in South Africa and other organisations that were trying to do something for the African workers. ICFTU, Mvubelo added, should rather encourage them and help them to do the job in South Africa for the African workers, because it could not be done from the outside.⁹³ It is thus clear that during 1974 Mvubelo was on the forefront of the fight for the workers of South Africa, not only in South Africa, but also internationally.

4. CONCLUSION

It is irrefutable that in 1974 Lucy Mvubelo was still on the forefront of the fight for the trade workers of South Africa, not only in South Africa, but also internationally. Between 1960 and 1974 she came to the fore as a well-known activist and leader among the trade unionists in the country. Her potential was realised by senior trade unionist leaders like Anna Scheepers and Johanna Cornelius and she worked in close cooperation with them. She attended various International Labour Organisation (ILO) and other labour meetings abroad and never hesitated in her quest to obtain better wages and working conditions, especially for black and coloured trade union workers in South Africa. It was not always an easy task, because she was regarded by some of her co-workers as a pacifist, and not extreme enough in her attitude against the unpopular apartheid government. This, in spite of the fact that Mvubelo made it clear that her main concern was black workers' position in SA trade unions. Their credibility was of utmost importance and she regarded herself as a fierce trade unionist leader and no politician. Thus, she made it clear that she left politics to the politicians. In the heat of South African politics and the fierce resistance against apartheid she was not always accepted in her own country and abroad as the right leader to agitate for a new dispensation among trade workers. Nevertheless, she stuck to her strong beliefs and she never hesitated to oppose the South African government and the negative trade leaders abroad in achieving what she regarded as in the best interests of trade unions in her own country. In these turbulent years of apartheid Mvubelo was the right trade leader to oppose negative politicians and trade union workers in such a way that eventually they tolerated her and allowed her to attend labour meetings all over the world and still continued to advocate changes in South African trade unions. Looking back, one realises that she was no puppet of the apartheid government and never hesitated to intervene on behalf of those people she held dear to her heart – the trade union workers.

93 AH 1092, GWU, Cba 1.4.3.4 1972-1975. Correspondence and papers. Letter WG Lawrence–Lucy Mvubelo, 5 June 1974.