

ANNA SCHEEPERS' STRUGGLE FOR THE RECOGNITION OF THE DIGNITY OF LABOUR FOR ALL WORKERS AND FOR THE EQUALITY OF WOMEN IN ALL SPHERES

Irene Strydom and Pieter Coetzer¹

1. ANNA SCHEEPERS IN A NUTSHELL

It is at the outset of this article important to briefly shed light on the career of Anna Scheepers. Anna was born at Krugersdorp (Transvaal) on 18 March 1914. She was the second of nine children with a spread of 20 years from the oldest to the youngest.² She was obliged to leave school in her grade 12 year, because her family suffered financially due to the Depression. After this a lifetime of "self-education" followed. In 1932 she arrived in Johannesburg and entered the labour market as a teenage fruit-counter hand in Malvern (Johannesburg).³ Two years later her involvement with the Garment Workers' Union (GWU) began when she was employed by Jaffe and Co. Thus her struggle for the dignity of all workers and for the equality of women in all spheres started. (Cf subheading 3 of this article: *Scheepers moves into the ranks of the trade union workers.*) Within another four years, in 1938, she became President of the GWU, still only 24 years old!⁴

Scheepers' employers soon realized that this woman was in many ways remarkable. At the age of 19, in June 1943, she stood for Parliament in Fordsburg as an Independent Labour Party candidate. She lost against DC Burnside of the Labour Party.⁵ In 1968, moving up in the ranks of the GWU, she was chosen as the first and only woman on the General Council of the International Textile, Clothing and Leather Workers Federation. She was Africa's representative. This international organization represented more than three million workers from 55 countries. another milestone was in 1972 when she was singled out as one of 200 of the most successful

¹ Irene Strydom is a lecturer at the Christian Academy in Swakopmund (Namibia). She obtained her MA degree in 2007 at the University of the Free State under the title "Labouring for a better life: The struggle of Anna Scheepers and Lucy Mvubelo for better labour conditions, 1960-1980". Her promoter was Prof. PW Coetzer, Research Fellow of the Department of History. E-mail: strydom007@yahoo.com and coetzerpw.hum@ufs.ac.za

² C Knox, "The total woman" in *Fair Lady*, 16 February 1977.

³ *Krugersdorp News*, 27 June 1986.

⁴ *Supplement to The Star*, 7 December 1972; William Cullen Library, University of the Witwatersrand (hereafter only referred to as AH 1092). AH 1092 Bce 3 5. GWU. International Organization Transactions/ Personal Papers of Officials. Anna Scheepers 1969-1970. Rotary-East Rand, 4 March 1969.

⁵ GG 3230. General Election Results 1943, 13 August 1943; *Parliamentary Register 1910-1961* (House of Assembly, 1970), pp. 77 and 133.

women in the world. At the end of 1972 she was also nominated by the Johannesburg newspaper, *The Star*, as their Woman of the Year.⁶

This was not the end of her many awards. In April 1973 she received an honorary doctorate in Law at the University of the Witwatersrand. She received this award due to her dedication towards South African labour affairs among all races and for the contributions she had made towards economic justice and industrial peace.⁷

During a smear campaign levelled at her when she stood for Parliament as the United Party candidate for Boksburg at the beginning of 1974, *Die Transvaler*, a daily Afrikaans newspaper, insinuated that she had communist leanings. Scheepers immediately issued a R25 000 challenge to the newspaper to prove it. She had already been awarded R5 000 in damages from people who had falsely made the same accusations. The newspaper in question made a public apology before the argument was taken to court. "I have never been a communist and I never intend to become one", she said, "but I will not abandon my idea of humanity."⁸ In May of that year she was chosen as United Party Senator. In Parliament she was an active spokesperson for better labour conditions for South African labourers. She regularly clashed with the National Party government and their "machine room", the Afrikaner Broederbond (AB). Scheepers remained in the Senate for six and a half years till 1980 when the United Party was dissolved.⁹

2. THE EARLIEST FORMS OF ORGANIZATION IN THE CLOTHING INDUSTRY

The earliest form of organization in the clothing industry was the Witwatersrand Middleman Tailors' Association (WMTA) established in 1896.¹⁰ The WMTA was the forerunner of the Garment Workers' Union of South Africa (GWUSA) and the National Union of Clothing Workers (NUCW), the two unions Anna Scheepers and Lucy Mvubelo¹¹ respectively represented.

Before the outbreak of World War I the clothing industry in South Africa grew sporadically. In 1913 a meeting of workers in the tailoring industry founded the Witwatersrand Tailors' Association.¹² This association was a separate entity than

⁶ *The Star*, 14 November 1972.

⁷ Letter GR Bozzoli–Anna Scheepers, 4 December 1972; *The Star*, 24 January 1973; Archives for Contemporary History (ARCH), University of the Free State (hereafter only referred to as PV 414). PV 414, Inventory Senator A Scheepers Private Document Collection.

⁸ *Sunday Times*, 27 May 1974.

⁹ *Boksburg Advertiser*, 11 January 1974.

¹⁰ GWU, Bbc 1.36: ES Sachs, "The split in the GWU, Transvaal 1934; GWU, Bcd 4: Proceedings of GWU. Commission of Inquiry 1949. Evidence of ES Sachs, p. 957.

¹¹ A follow on article on Lucy Mvubelo and her role in the garment workers unions will be written in 2010.

¹² E Gytsham and YF Trembath, *Labour organization in South Africa* (Durban, 1926), p. 110.

the WMTA, referred to earlier. The WTA's main task was to eliminate sweating in tailoring workshops and increase wages for workers.¹³ Thus the clothing industry was still in its infancy when Anna Scheepers entered the ranks of the trade union workers in the early thirties.

3. SCHEEPERS MOVES INTO THE RANKS OF THE TRADE UNION WORKERS

Anna Scheepers' involvement with the Garment Workers' Union (GWU) started when she was employed by Jaffe and Co. early in 1934. Mr ES (Solly) Sachs, General Secretary of the GWU, addressed a meeting of the workers of another company, S Jaff and Co., appealing to them to join the union. He informed them about all the benefits a union could offer, and what impressed Scheepers most was the offer of a comprehensive medical aid scheme to which each employee contributed a ticky (2,5 cents) a week. No one befriended the workers or helped to improve their conditions except the union and its officials, and she therefore joined the union.¹⁴

Workers began to take an active interest in the union which was acquiring these benefits for them. Scheepers was soon elected as a shop steward. In 1937 she was elected as a member of the Central Executive Committee of the Union. After four months' probation she was appointed as a full-time paid official of the union.¹⁵ What attributed to Scheepers' climbing of the success ladder at such a tender age? Many reasons can be given, but as it is discussed in detail later in this article, the environment in which she grew up as well as her strong personality played important roles to mould her into the strong leader she became. Her faith in God was her anchor in life. She once rightly said: "Let nothing be too big or small to ask for God's guidance and help."¹⁶

It was on 11 August 1938 that Scheepers, then a shy Johannesburg dress factory supervisor, aged 24, rose to diffidently accept nomination for presidency of an even younger trade union. She took office as President of the Garment Workers' Union of South Africa (GWUSA), and in spite of the election being by ballot of the members on all the following occasions, she was always returned with overwhelming majorities over her opponents.¹⁷ Scheepers had been President for an historic 46 years. This is believed to be a world record for any person, depending on return to office through

¹³ L Witz, *Servant of the workers: Solly Sachs and the Garment Workers' Union, 1928-1952* (M. Com dissertation, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 1984).

¹⁴ *Die Vaderland*, 10 August 1982; *Krugersdorp News*, 27 June 1986; AH 1092, Bce 3.5. GWU. International Organisations/Personal Papers of Officials. Anna Scheepers 1969-1970. Rotary-East Rand, 4 March 1969.

¹⁵ Commission of Enquiry, GWU I. Statement by Anna Scheepers, Johannesburg, May 1949, p. 3.

¹⁶ *Supplement to The Star*, 7 December 1972.

¹⁷ AH 1092, Bce 3.5. GWU. International Organisation/Transactions/Personal Papers of Officials. Anna Scheepers 1969-1970. Rotary-East Rand, 4 March 1969.

democratic free choice by an electorate.¹⁸ It is clear that Scheepers really practised what she preached. She believed in equal opportunities for all, no racial prejudice and absolute dedication to the workers' cause.¹⁹

During four consecutive decades she helped to lift the GWUSA into one of the most influential unions in organized labour. She learned much from the then General Secretary, Solly Sachs.²⁰ Her association with Sachs, and the fact that she attended - as a trade union delegate among scores of other such delegates from all parts of the world - Soviet anniversary celebrations in Moscow in 1938, that she expressed an admiration for the USSR and Communism on her return, and that she later sent greetings to the Society for Peace and Friendship with the USSR, she was labelled the sort of person whose activities had to be suppressed in the interests of national security and well-being.

This subsequently led to a great many smear attacks on her. Scheepers, together with Sachs and Hester and Johanna Cornelius, was labelled one of "The Big Four" of the GWU by Oswald Pirow, the then Minister of Justice. Pirow branded them as communists who propagated Communism amongst the garment workers.²¹

From 1935 onwards the Garment Workers' Union was subjected to the most scurrilous attacks by the Blackshirts, Greyshirts, and leaders of the National Party in Parliament, by the National Party press and by other reactionary elements. Scheepers wrote in 1944 that the greatest menace to the conditions of the workers of South Africa, and more particularly to the Afrikaans-speaking workers, was the pro-Fascist element.²²

Scheepers also warned the workers against Nazi propaganda, and that there never had been room for Hitlerites in their union. She regarded the Afrikaner Broederbond (AB) as an organization preaching racial hatred.²³ She helped to motivate workers to participate in a campaign against racialism in trade unions.²⁴

There was, however, no suggestion that Scheepers had actively promoted the communist doctrine or fostered communistic dissension at any time in South Africa. She said that in those days anybody who fought for the workers was branded as a communist.²⁵

Although officials of the GWU actively worked for the Labour Party, and Johanna Cornelius, Solly Sachs and Anna Scheepers fought elections as party

¹⁸ *Supplement to The Star*, 7 December 1972; *Rand Daily Mail*, 31 October 1972.

¹⁹ *Financial Mail*, 26 January 1973.

²⁰ *The Star*, 18 January 1952.

²¹ *Die Vaderland*, 29 September 1945; Irene Strydom, *Labouring for a better life: the struggle of Anna Scheepers and Lucy Mvubelo for better labour conditions, 1960-1980* (MA dissertation, UFS, 2007), p. 5.

²² "The Fascist reaction 2. Attack on garment workers" in *Forward*, 14 July 1944.

²³ The AB began a campaign to promote Afrikaner trade unions in 1934.

²⁴ *Sunday Times*, 29 June 1941, "Workers flay Malan for worshipping monsters"; *Sunday Express*, 11 June 1939, "Afrikaner Bond attack on trade unions".

²⁵ *Natal Mercury*, 7 January 1952; *The Star*, 12 August 1941.

candidates, they never attempted to interfere with members whose political views differed from theirs.²⁶

In June 1943 Anna Scheepers stood for Parliament as an Independent Labour Party candidate in Fordsburg. Her fiery manifesto included the statement that “the capitalists encourage racial hatred because it serves to divide the workers so they won’t present a united front”.²⁷ She was well known for her tireless efforts to bridge the barrier of racial differences. This later caused Scheepers to clash very often with the ruling National Party and their policy of separate development (later referred to as “apartheid”).

Scheepers always stood on the forefront of efforts to rid workers of racial prejudice. In her words: “I have always believed that South Africa is a single nation. And that requires that there should be equal opportunity for all.” She said that Sachs had taught her that there could be no racialism in the trade union movement.²⁸

In addition to the impassioned anti-Nazi speeches she made in 1949, which were misinterpreted, Scheepers’ egalitarian views periodically provided her critics with ammunition to use against her.²⁹

Scheepers always believed that her strong faith in God was the anchor in her life. Being President of the Garment Workers’ Union she saw as a noble task. The trade union was the voice of the workers. She was convinced that it was very important to work for the poorly paid workers, and that her prayers and strong faith helped tens of thousands of workers to live a better life.³⁰

4. SCHEEPERS’ STRUGGLE FOR THE RECOGNITION OF THE DIGNITY OF LABOUR FOR ALL WORKERS TO PARTICIPATE IN THE DETERMINATION OF THEIR CONDITIONS OF EMPLOYMENT

This remarkable lady believed it was essential that the dignity of workers as human beings should be recognized and this meant giving them a say in matters affecting their working conditions. She fought for many years for the recognition that all workers, black, white, coloured and Asian, are human beings with dignity, rights and obligations. All workers, irrespective of colour, had to have a share in the welfare of the country. She always stressed not only the rights but also the responsibilities that all workers have. It is these responsibilities that give workers dignity - the dignity that is inherent in every thinking human being. This dignity gives them rights - not the least to decide on their own actions and own future within the framework of natural law, if not statute law. When dignity is denied, trouble will be experienced.³¹

²⁶ ES Sachs, *Rebels’ daughters* (Alva, Great Britain, 1957), p. 221.

²⁷ *Fair Lady*, 16 February 1977.

²⁸ *Financial Mail*, 26 January 1973; *Sunday Times*, 31 March 1974.

²⁹ *Fair Lady*, 16 February 1977.

³⁰ *Die Gesant* 6(2), May 1973, p. 2.

³¹ *Volkstem*, 3 July 1979.

Scheepers and the GWUSA were concerned that it was not enough to give people work and promote them to more skilled occupations. Blacks, she realized, were not interested in what could be done for them, but were interested in what they could do for themselves and their country. The wage gap between white and African earnings was due to the fact that many of the Labour Acts did not give the African worker elementary negotiating machinery to improve their position. As it had been already discussed in detail earlier, Scheepers pleaded as leader of the GWUSA and the Trade Union Council of South Africa (TUCSA) as well as Senator that authorities should bring about change and concede legitimate requests before it was forced through pressure to do so.³²

The government, employers and trade unionists had to be awakened to the dangers eminent in unemployment and underemployment of the vast majority of the population which in times of economic set-backs could lead to upheavals, strikes and chaos for South Africa. Scheepers said a complete change of approach by the white worker towards the black worker was a priority. For the GWUSA this was no difficult task, because since inception, its policy was that all workers irrespective of race should be granted the right to work, the right to belong to a trade union, equal pay and equal opportunities. This was proved by the close liaison with the African Union, and the National Union of Clothing Workers (NUCW).³³ Under the leadership of Scheepers the GWUSA wanted and worked for a free trade union unfettered by employer influences. They always believed in the inherent rights of human dignity for all races.³⁴

Many of the acts against which Scheepers fought as discussed earlier in this article, violated the dignity and individuality of man. Without trade unions and trade union leaders like Scheepers and her contemporaries acting as watchdogs, changes in legislation which covered factories, shops and other places of work could not be brought about. Without trade unions and strong trade union leaders, the dignity of the worker could not be upheld. In an article in the *Garment Worker* Scheepers was quoted to say, "A man without a job is not a man."³⁵ This might be an unfair statement, but if thought is given to it, the truth of it will become clear. If individuals do not work, they cannot earn a living. They therefore cannot buy the necessary food and other goods for their families. And on another level, the unemployed cannot express themselves. They cannot experience a sense of achievement. Their self-respect is undermined and they become dependent on the charity of others. People without a sense of purpose are then reduced to a state of dependence in which human rights and dignity are most of the time ignored.

³² *The Argus*, 6 March 1980.

³³ Established in 1962.

³⁴ *Garment Worker/Klerewerker*, 30 November 1973.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 20 October 1972.

There is no doubt whatsoever that Scheepers fought for the dignity of labour for all workers and the right of all workers to participate in the determination of their conditions of employment. One has to agree to what was earlier said by the mayor of Johannesburg, Ms J Lemmer: "She is clothed in dignity and power. She always showed much dignity and the power she wielded became even greater."³⁶ She had self-respect and respected others and everybody with whom she came into contact, respected her. She did not fear to contradict and be contradicted, she feared only the loss of her dignity as a human being and the loss of dignity forced upon others. That is why she fought discriminatory laws so fearlessly.

4.1 Scheepers' struggle for the equality of women in all spheres

Another ideal that Scheepers claimed she fought for was complete equality for women in all respects. Considering everything that had been written so far about Scheepers, she certainly sounds like a super career woman and one would expect that she was a feminist and advocate of women's liberation. She was nothing of the sort. In an interview with a *Star* reporter she rightly said: "I'm no feminist, but it galls me to see men who consider themselves superior. I advocate equal pay for equal work regardless of gender or colour of skin."³⁷

There are many articles to support Scheepers' claim that she fought for complete equality for women in all respects. Scheepers always made a strong plea for the recognition of the permanence of the woman worker in South Africa and the improvement of her status. Speaking at an International Women's Year Seminar on the 9th of August 1975 at the University of the Witwatersrand, Scheepers attacked the traditional concept of the woman as a housewife. She saw it as an out-of-date fallacy, and went as far as to say: "Our future training and education of a woman must be geared to her development as a worker first and foremost and only secondary for her role as housewife and mother."³⁸

Manpower needs of the two world wars, and the consequent patterns in consumer demand had contributed much to the elimination of the stigma attached to working mothers, until in 1975 well over two and a half million women were economically active in South Africa - out of approximately eight million economic active persons. This indicated that women were permanent workers to be considered.³⁹

Scheepers dealt with the male hostility which she said was very evident to her as a trade unionist. She linked it to racial fears where "rate for the job" also posed an imaginary threat to male workers. She believed that in the same way as job

³⁶ *The Star*, 7 December 1972.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 14 November 1972.

³⁸ Speech delivered by Scheepers at the International Women's Year Seminar, University of the Witwatersrand, 9 August 1975.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

reservation had proved unworkable, so gender-based fears would be economically eliminated. She argued that men need not fear female competition - the demand for workers protected them as did the fact that few women qualified.⁴⁰

But she went even further, arguing that men should be honest about their motives and by eliminating the “women are inferior” excuse come to support the idea of “equal pay for equal work” as in fact being in their own interest. Firms which employed female managers tended to be happy with their performance, according to the magazine *Management*. Although the claims of inferiority could be dismissed when assessing work standards, it could unfortunately not be dismissed concerning wage levels. An investigation by the Human Rights Research Council (HSRC) in March 1971 showed median salaries of women in the private sector to be half that of men, and 35% lower in government service. Only in medicine, surgery and pharmacy did women earn approximately the same as men in the government sector, while in librarianship a woman’s salary was 45% lower!⁴¹

According to Scheepers these wage levels in fact constituted a threat to male employees. Although male hostility and low wages deterred women, the salaries attracted enough women for them to pose a threat to males. She said the time had arrived when South Africa had to follow the example of the leading industrial nations of the world by also introducing legislation that would protect the men against replacement by women at lower wage levels. She added that the USA had introduced the Equal Pay Act in 1963 and in Britain a similar act had been introduced in 1970. Scheepers believed that the introduction of similar legislation in South Africa would motivate women to obtain equal qualifications to men and would equally motivate parents to encourage and finance their daughters to obtain the required qualifications, knowing that they would be equally well remunerated as their sons. She explained that the USA had recognized women to be essential, distinctive and a permanent part of its manpower resources. She quoted the National Manpower Council of New York that stated, “Women constitute not only an essential, but also a distinctive part of our manpower resources. They are essential because without their presence in the labour force we could neither produce and distribute the goods nor provide the educational, health and other services which characterises our society. They constitute a distinctive manpower resource because the structure and the substance of the lives of most women are fundamentally determined by their functions as wives, mothers and home makers.”⁴²

Scheepers also saw the women of South Africa as one of the country’s greatest resources. She said women’s skills and abilities were being used more fully and more creatively in the home, in the community and on the job, but not enough was

⁴⁰ *Garment Worker/Klerewerker*, 15 August 1975.

⁴¹ *Management in Garment Worker*, 15 August 1975.

⁴² *Ibid.*

being done and South Africa's economic development was being retarded; the legal disabilities under which women had to live was an ascertainable fact and had to be removed. It had to be realized that the growing demand for consumer goods was beyond the income of a single wage earned per family and for this reason full utilization would have to be made not only of female manpower but also of female brain power.⁴³ She *inter alia* told the reporter of *The Star*: "To cope with South Africa's problems we need the best brains. I think women have strong feelings where men are a little bit indifferent ... like the cost of living and social welfare."⁴⁴

Anna Scheepers believed that a revolution was taking place as regards the status of women, particularly as a result of family planning and the concept of zero population growth which reduced the burden of motherhood and enabled a very large number of women to re-enter the labour field at a comparatively young age. She stressed that educational facilities had to be provided for women during their motherhood stage to enable them to play their full role in the promotion of welfare of the community. She quoted the late President of the USA, Lyndon Johnson, who described the underutilization of women's skills as "the most tragic and most senseless waste of this century". He went on to say: "It is a waste we can no longer afford. Our economy is crying out for their services." Scheepers said this statement was certainly true of South Africa as well.⁴⁵

In the Senate Scheepers in 1973 proposed that all discriminatory labour laws had to be repealed, so that South Africa could utilize its full potential concerning its available reserve work force, namely also blacks and women. She told the Senate: "I feel that it is time that we let (these) women feel that they are part of this country. I also believe that a woman does not have to ask any favours. If it is equality they seek, then they have to be able to stand their ground wherever they can. Only because of biological reasons there may be differentiation, but under any other circumstances they have to be able to do the work that is required of them"⁴⁶ (translated).

Scheepers always stressed that one of the most important tasks of management was to assist in the change in attitudes concerning the employment of women and to set an example by promoting women, where possible, into higher skills and executive positions.⁴⁷

In an address to the Business and Professional Women's Club in 1975 at Rondebosch, Scheepers conveyed a strong message: "Women are not given equality

⁴³ PV 414: Anna Scheepers, 2/1/2 (July 1974-August 1975). Speech delivered by Scheepers, International Women's Year Seminar, University of the Witwatersrand, 9 August 1975.

⁴⁴ *The Star*, 23 April 1974.

⁴⁵ PV 414: Anna Scheepers, 2/1/2 (July 1974-August 1975). Speech delivered by Scheepers, International Women's Year Seminar, University of the Witwatersrand, 9 August 1975.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, File 2/1/1, January 1973-July 1973. Speeches, statements and messages. Senator Anna Scheepers, UP Senator for Transvaal, 1974-1980.

⁴⁷ Republic of South Africa. *Senate Debates* (Second session – Fourth Senate), Vol. II, 18 June 1975, col. 4264.

of opportunity.” She showed how women were denied equality and opportunity in the South African society. Although women workers were required by the economy, they were not given a full share of the jobs available.⁴⁸

To prove her statement she *inter alia* said:

- Women were denied advancement. A survey revealed that although in some companies 55% of the labour were women workers only 17% of the supervisors were women and a mere 1,5% managers.
- Women were not given training. A survey showed that in house or factory training programmes run by companies only 15% of the people participating were women and the rest men. When it came to training courses outside the company 60% of firms never sent women on seminars but 90% of firms regularly sent men.
- Women were not sent to university. Out of 10 000 students at the University of the Witwatersrand, only 2 500 were women. Furthermore, in the dentistry faculty only 10 out of 320 students were women; in architecture 48 out of 440, in law 41 out of 239, in engineering 12 out of 1 400 were women.
- Women were discriminated against in income tax legislation. A married woman earning R7 000 had to pay nearly 25% more in income tax than if she was single. Scheepers reported that she had told the retired Minister of Finance that married women should not be penalized for providing extra services. If the state needed more money, she said, the tax burden had to be spread among all taxpayers.
- Legislation limited the rights of women. Although the Matrimonial Affairs Act improved the situation due to efforts of Bertha Solomon, there were still limitations on the rights of married women. Some of these limitations were:
 - ❖ guardianship of children;
 - ❖ the law of inheritance as it affected women who were married in community of property;
 - ❖ numerous problems for those women married in community of property;
 - ❖ the contractual capacity of women;
 - ❖ registration of immovable property;
 - ❖ hire purchase agreements.

Furthermore, the Public Service Act provided that when a woman got married she had to be dismissed and if she continued in her job she was not classified as a permanent worker. Scheepers said it was wrong to use the ability of women workers but penalize them just because they got married. She gave interesting evidence to show that the system of full-time work acted against married women. “The working married woman had to be mother to her children, wife to her husband and look after the home while spending at least eight hours a day at work. These dual roles

⁴⁸ *Garment Worker/Klerewerker*, 21 February 1975.

which working women have to perform must result in her at times being away from work.” Scheepers continued saying that if a woman could work half the day she could perform both roles of worker and housewife far better.

Many countries were making use of part-time workers in order that the mother could be at home in the afternoon when children come from school. Scheepers said that research conducted at a food factory in Britain showed that labour turnover was reduced considerably when women workers worked either in the morning or the afternoon. Amongst fulltime workers the turnover of labour was 49%. But with morning workers the turnover was 10% and with afternoon workers it was 17%.

This trade union leader also deplored the problems which faced African women. She said: “We as white women suffer discrimination but the African women are in a far worse position. They may not live with their husbands in the cities without a permit. Those who are living in the cities and whose children were not born there may not have their children with them. They may not move from one area to another. They may not build a home according to their requirement and their wishes. They must leave their homes should their husbands die.”

In conclusion she reminded her audience that the discrimination against women was to some extent their own fault. Women should not accept an inferior position just because of tradition. She said: “We need motivation and encouragement to aspire for positions, but if we don't fight for it we will not get to the top.” Scheepers had shown what it meant to fight to get to the top. And this was why she was asked, so often, to address audiences. Her achievements proved that if there was determination, women would get to the top.⁴⁹

4.2 The politician: Perseverance towards equality for all workers

From speeches Anna Scheepers made it is clear that she was a very knowledgeable person on the topic of discrimination against women and that she always went out of her way to bring about gender equality. Not only as President of the GWUSA and later TUCSA, but also as Senator, she worked very hard for complete equality for women in all aspects.

In her first year in the Senate, in 1974, she said that it was almost impossible to think that any civilized country could even consider legislation that would discriminate against married women. She also referred to the Geysers Commission's recommendation that more use had to be made of the service of women. She told the Senate:⁵⁰ “I feel with the competency levels (of married women) and the intense shortage in labour, we should stop discriminating against married women.” She repeatedly attacked the proposed discriminatory legislation against women that government tried to pass through Senate.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Republic of South Africa. *Debatte van die Senaat* (Eerste Sitting – Vierde Senaat), Vol. II, 8 October 1974, col. 2752, 2756.

“In my opinion, it is truly shameful that our Government continues to insult women. In every possible way women fulfill their role in the economy, and in my opinion - as a woman - I would not like to fill a post at the mercy of a minister or anybody else. I want to do my job on merit, that is all, and this is what we request of every woman who renders her services with loyalty to the state ... I feel that the married woman should not get prosecuted because she offers her services, instead she should receive praise, because the married woman has more to sacrifice than any other woman.” (Translated.)⁵¹

Scheepers moved in the Senate in 1975 that the Government should remove all legal and other forms of discrimination against women, thereby giving them equal status to that of men in all spheres of public and private life and as a first step, to recommend the appointment of a Commission of Inquiry into the status of women and to formulate a possible programme for the elimination of discrimination”. No need to say her motion was defeated.

This trade union leader and politician always said that the main reasons why women were not absorbed in the professional and technical fields were that their labour was not valued to the same extent as that of their male counterparts. Then, the same opportunities for promotion did not exist and lastly, but most important, was the fact that women were taxed out of the labour market. She said that the pernicious method of joint taxation of husband and wife was one of the greatest disincentives for highly qualified women to work. Scheepers said that in the interest of South Africa and human dignity, discrimination against women, whether legal or through prejudice, had to be removed. She added: “Women should therefore not always take a back seat. If they try, they will find that they are not inferior to males. They should enter all types of positions, including public life, if the opportunity arises.”⁵²

Already in 1967, Scheepers said that she wholeheartedly endorsed the view of the National Union of Distributive Workers that one of the ways to overcome the shortage of workers lay in separate taxation of husband and wife.⁵³

In 1977 Scheepers spoke about the legal status of women. She said white and coloured women’s legal status improved much since 1927. She was however very concerned about the black women’s legal status. She quoted Monica Wilson to prove to the Senate that the black women in South Africa’s legal status definitely had to be addressed. Wilson *inter alia* said:

“The legal assumption enshrined in Roman law and in the law of most African people was that a woman was a perpetual minor under the guardianship either of her husband, her father or his heir. She never reached legal majority and never became free to act as every man did at some stage though the age of independence was variable. This perpetual minority of women implied inequality, for a minor is never equal to the guardian. Guardianship implies the lawful authority which one person has over another person. It includes custody of the minor’s person and control over his/her education and property.”

⁵¹ Republic of South Africa. *Debatte van die Senaat* 51, 16 October 1974, col. 3014.

⁵² *Volkstem*, 31 May 1978.

⁵³ *Garment Worker/Klerewerker*, 19 May 1967.

Scheepers also referred to the African *lobola* custom. She said it was a system that she would have hated if she was a black person - just the fact that she could be sold to a man. She asked the government to pay serious attention to this matter. It would not cost the government a cent, but it would free the black woman from her shackles.⁵⁴

As chairperson of the Management Committee of the Medical Benefit Society for the clothing industry, Scheepers had to be complemented on the stand she took in opposing the discrimination against women in the Medical Schemes Act. The Medical Schemes Act, as originally passed, made it a criminal offence for any person to belong to two medical schemes. This provision was particularly hard on female workers in the clothing industry who, as dependants of their husbands, were compelled to belong to their husbands' medical benefit or medical aid society and were debarred from membership of their own Medical Benefit Society.

Various memoranda were submitted by Scheepers and her Medical Benefit Society that advocated that women should not be reduced to the status of minors, but should be given the option of electing whether or not they wished to belong to their husbands' society or that society catering for the industry in which they were employed. One of the proposed amendments would have given every woman the right to elect to which society she wished to belong.⁵⁵

Scheepers also fought for more crèches and pre-primary and day care centres for young children. She said women could and should in future make an important contribution to the labour force if certain issues were dealt with. The first and most important issues were children's welfare or care.⁵⁶

In 1981, as newly elected President of TUCSA, Scheepers committed herself fully to the Women's Committee of TUCSA. They wanted to make sure all women realized that a law had been passed that ensured equal pay for equal work. She wanted to motivate workers to report employers who did not bridge the wage gap within the next three months, thus before the end of 1984. She also motivated women to become more active in the trade unions. Women, she said, had all the characteristics to become excellent trade union leaders because they are generally more sympathetic than men. Women would be more willing to help with personal problems.⁵⁷

Another important issue that Scheepers spoke very strongly about was prostitution. She was very concerned about prostitution that escalated tremendously in South Africa. She said: "Prostitution must be legalized somehow or other. Thus

⁵⁴ Republic of South Africa. *Senate Debates* (Fourth Session – Fifth Parliament) 13 (Weekly Edition), 8 June 1977, col. 3681.

⁵⁵ *Garment Worker/Klerewerker*, 28 February 1975.

⁵⁶ "Die werkende vrou, ons ekonomie en kindersorg". Address by Senator Anna Scheepers, Golden Jubilee Conference of the South African Council for Child Care, Pretoria, 21-25 October 1974.

⁵⁷ *Volkstem*, 20 November 1981.

we will care for the health of all of these people.” What precisely had to be done to legalize prostitution, she did not tell the reporter of *Die Vaderland*. She however said that a thorough investigation was necessary concerning this serious social problem.⁵⁸ It is important to note at this stage that the only trade union in South Africa which provided a family planning clinic for its workers and regular pap smears was the Garment Workers’ Union.⁵⁹ Scheepers always was on the forefront of improving working and social conditions for all women workers. Whenever she found evidence of exploitation of women she stepped in and spoke out against it.

In 1984 Scheepers spoke at a seminar on “Women and Productivity” of the Women’s Bureau and the National Productivity Institute where she said that because of stereotyping women as inferior to men, many women do not apply for executive posts. She finally told the audience that it was necessary to teach people to dream again - and how to achieve their goals in life.⁶⁰ “Many women and blacks have accepted the misconception that they ‘cannot make’ it, because they are women or blacks.”

5. CONCLUSION

Anna Scheepers always stood at the forefront of efforts to rid workers of racial prejudice. In her words: “I have always worked for all people: that’s my fundamental principle. And I have never regretted it. A human being is a human being as far as I am concerned. If everyone worked for the betterment of all people we would not be in the danger we are today.” And: “I have always believed that South Africa is a single nation. And that requires that there should be equal opportunity for all.”⁶¹

By the time Scheepers retired, equal opportunities for all still did not exist. Even after legitimate trade unions had been extended to black workers in 1983, industrial peace and equality at the workplace were not a forgone conclusion. The process of consultation and negotiation embracing the total labour force without exclusion based on racial prejudice and discrimination, was not yet used for labour disputes to be resolved.

In an article in the *Sunday Times* of 27 May 1984, she said that Solly Sachs had taught her that there could be no racialism in the trade union movement. Scheepers said that her father was “a Smuts man - he was not a racist. Others had more difficulty in accepting people as people - on merit and not on skin colour.”⁶²

⁵⁸ *Die Vaderland*, 5 May 1980.

⁵⁹ *Garment Worker/Klerewerker*, 21 February 1975.

⁶⁰ *Beeld*, 10 August 1984.

⁶¹ *Financial Mail*, 26 January 1973.

⁶² *Sunday Times*, 31 March 1974.

One can conclude this article by stating that Anna Scheepers had fought merely for what she thought was right: a fair deal for women, and stressing the fact that she made it her sole purpose to fight for the equality of all women of South Africa.

Battling “Suster Anna”, the lady who for 50 years dominated the South African trade union movement, was a woman of many parts: shrewd politician, dedicated homemaker and staunch supporter of human rights. One of her colleagues said: “She will leave behind her a vacuum and a legend - the legend of Anna Scheepers.”⁶³ This tough trade unionist who was arrested, who marched, fought employers and spoke and wrote millions of words for the lesser privileged people of South Africa was indeed - a woman for all seasons!

⁶³ *The Star*, 31 October 1972.