

HEROES OF OUR REVOLUTION

(Comrade Oscar Mpetha)

- R. MATAJO

Comrade Oscar Mpetha was born at Mount Fletcher, Transkei in 1909. His parents at great sacrifice sent him to Adams College, in Natal. During the hungry 30s he came to Cape Town and worked as a waiter, docker, hospital orderly and road worker. Whilst in Cape Town he attended classes to learn Afrikaans and at the same time taught Xhosa to his Afrikaans tutors.

In 1945 the Food and Canning Workers' Union (FCWU) organisers went to Vredenburg, Veldrift, Laaipek and Berg River Mouth hamlets to organise the workers in the newly opened fish canning and processing factories. At that time the FCWU had already organised the workers on the Namaqualand coast, Saldanha Bay, St. Helena Bay and Paternoster. The Union had won higher wages, better working conditions, housing, clinics and schools by the militancy and unity of the workers. When the FCWU organisers visited Laaipek during the long week-end in October most of the workers had gone to a football game in Paarl. The union organisers went from house to house, talking to women workers and

Seventy-four year old Comrade Oscar Mpetha wearing leg-irons.



housewives; left leaflets with application forms and the union constitution and urged them to have a meeting and resolve to join the union.

About two weeks later the FCWU head-office received a letter in response to the union's appeal, expressing their desire to join the FCWU. This letter was signed on behalf of the workers by Oscar Mpetha who asked for more application forms.

The union not only sent application forms, but sent him money to attend the next NEC meeting. At this meeting a full discussion took place on conditions in the factories and ways and means of organising the unorganised workers. The Union grew. Branches of the Union were established with functioning factory committees. Comrade Oscar Mpetha was elected branch secretary at Laaiplek.

There were many complaints in the factories such as contradictions of the Factories Act of 1941 and Wage Determination. Not only did the Union demand that these complaints should be corrected, but demanded higher wages and better working and living conditions. In January 1947, the employers felt the workers restlessness and called in the Department of Labour inspectors. The employers called in Comrade Oscar and the factory committee to meet the inspectors.

EMPLOYEE

The FCWU though registered, had defied the definition of employee in the 1927-37 act that AFRICANS ARE NOT EMPLOYEES, it was one Union of all workers irrespective of race. The then Smuts government had appeased the Nationalist Party; it shot down brutally African miners during the historic African Miners' Strike in August 1946. It had exposed itself during this strike as the enemy of African workers. It arrested and prosecuted the central executive members of the Communist Party, and members of the Council of non-European Trade Unions who led the African Miners Strike. The Smuts government generally began to harass the people's organisations - the ANC, Indian Congress and progressive trade unions. It demanded that the FCWU should abide by the Industrial Conciliation Act. The Union refused and the department of labour threatened to deregister the Union and to turn down all the Union's applications for Conciliation Boards. The FCWU has never had an Industrial Council. The union had forced employers by united strike action to sign with the Union private (gentlemen's) agreements.

For 6-7 months the Union debated the threat by the Department of Labour at factory, branch and at the National Executive Committee meetings and quarterly branch delegates conferences. Finally at a Branch Delegates Conference held on 27th November the decision was taken to establish the African Food and Canning Workers Union and that the two unions are to work in complete unison in their relentless struggle against the exploiters, for higher wages

and better working and living conditions. It was a bitter decision to take but the membership regarded this as a necessary step to retain the unity of the workers. In fact Ray Alexander, the General Secretary of the FCWU was elected also the General Secretary of the A-FCWU.

Following the National Party victory in 1948, the oppressed and exploited black people faced a vicious government bent on suppressing the trade unions particularly the African trade unions and the people's organisations fighting for democratic rights. The Nationalist regime introduced the Suppression of Communism Act and a host of other oppressive legislation.

At the Annual Conferences of the unions in 1950 the conferences agreed to empower the incoming NECs to select and train new office bearers in the event of the regime banning Ray Alexander and others from the Union leadership. Comrade Oscar Mpetha and Lena Avontuur were chosen to work in the HQ. On the 1st of September 1950 both came for training in the HQ. In 1951 he was elected as a paid general secretary of the A-FCWU with Ray Alexander as the Hon. General Secretary. By September 1953 no less than 12 leaders of the FCWU were banned from holding office or in any way assisting in the work of the union. Among those banned was S.V. Reddy, (late Durban branch secretary) Betty du Toit, Johannesburg branch Secretary, Sarah Wentzel, Worcester, General Secretary Ray Alexander and other branch leaders.

The union carried on with new officials. By then Comrade Oscar was the most experienced of them all and a great deal of responsibility rested on him.

A.N.C.

He was elected President of the Cape Western Province ANC in 1959. He was detained in April 1960, banned and forced to give up his trade union work. He then opened a laundry depot.

In 1976 and 1977 during the Cillie Commission of Enquiry on Soweto and death by torture of Comrade Elijah Loza, Chairman of SACTU's Cape Town Committee - he came forward. Not only did he make an indictment against the regime to the Commission on the death of Elijah Loza but demanded to investigate its cause.

In 1978 the FCWU/A-FCWU asked him to return to the union as national organiser. The people needed his leadership and he came. He participated in 1979 in leading the Fattis and Monis strike. The strike which introduced new forms of struggle, gained wide national & international support combined with a successful boycott of all Fatti's and Monis products. This strike was followed by other successful militant strikes led by the two unions with Comrade Oscar in the leadership.

The people's militant mood was expressed in the struggle against rent increases and in 1980 there was a successful boycott of the city tramway

