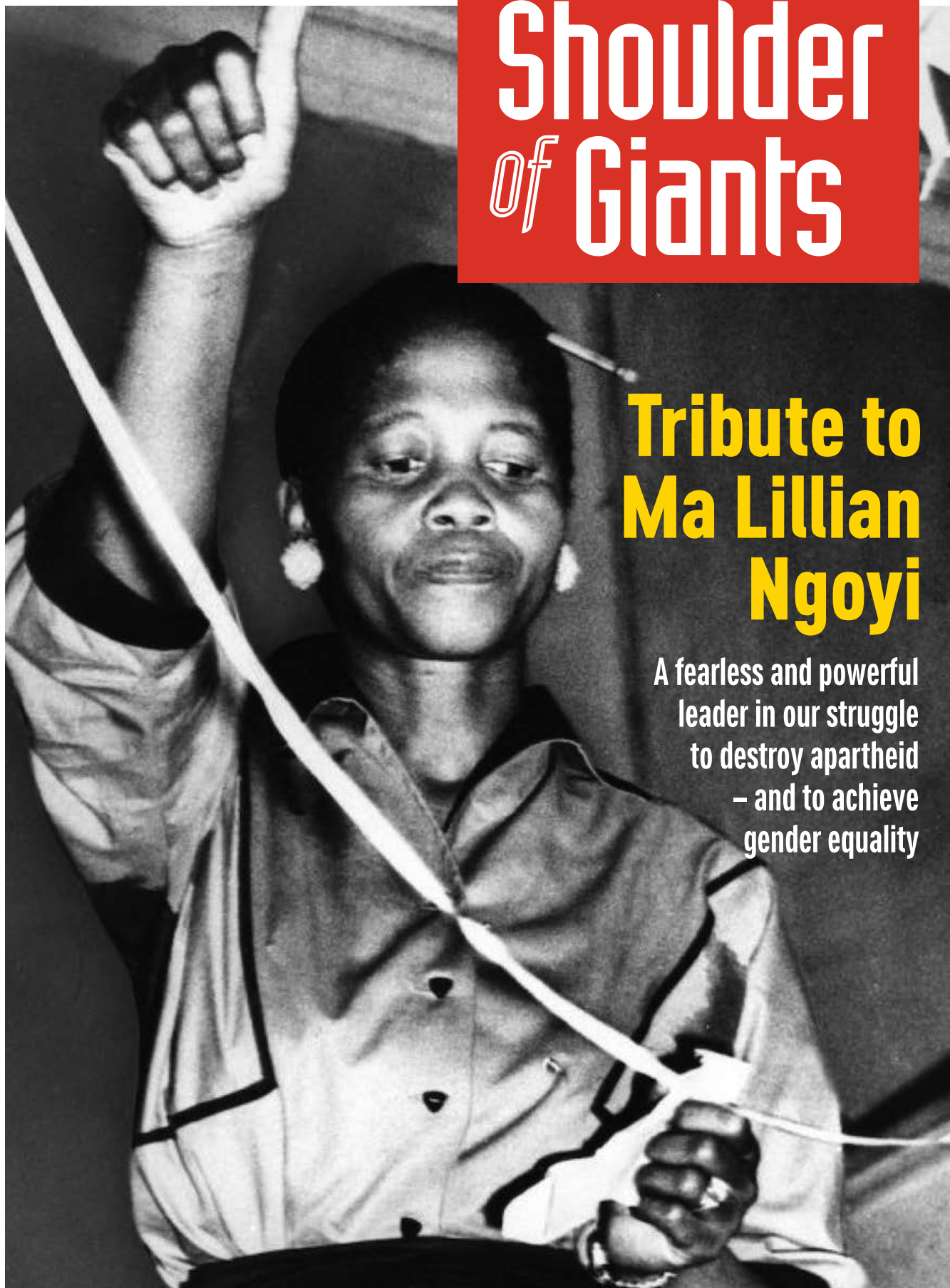


SUPPLEMENT TO
UMSEBENZI
MAY 2022

On The Shoulder *of* Giants

Tribute to Ma Lillian Ngoyi

A fearless and powerful
leader in our struggle
to destroy apartheid
– and to achieve
gender equality





More than 20 000 women stand silently in the Union Buildings amphitheatre on 9 August 1956 ...

*This first edition of the occasional **On the Shoulders of Giants** series in Umsebenzi is based on a memorial lecture delivered by SACP Deputy Chair Thulas Nxesi in March 2022 to mark the 42nd anniversary of Cde Ngoyi's death.*



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Remembering Ma Lillian Ngoyi

When Cde Lillian Masediba Ngoyi died on 13 March 1980, aged 68, we placed her name first on the list of heroines who struggled not only against racist domination, but also for the mobilisation of all the women of South Africa to fight this system. In this our centenary year, we as the South African Communist Party have joined hands with the family of MaNgoyi and our alliance partners to salute this giant among liberation fighters, and to recognise the breadth of her role in our history. We salute her as a worker, as a woman, as a mother, as an orator supreme, as an organiser and as a leader of courage and determination.

As we commemorate her extraordinary life, we reflect on the living and working conditions of working class women today and ask if we are doing enough to transform their existence to one that matches up to MaNgoyi's vision of a liberated South Africa. Working class women today continue to face unemployment, poverty, and hunger. They have inadequate access to neces-

sary water, sanitation, energy, transport and health care. Many working class women are in the unprotected informal economy, battling for survival of their families. We face the scourge of domestic and gender-based violence and femicide. Our families are riven by substance abuse and lack of healthy recreational facilities.

We have made significant gains. All women have the right to vote and be voted for – a central demand of the 1954 Women's Charter. Girls and young women are far advanced in education and working class young women can use Nsfas to access higher education. But the inequality in education access and infrastructure for working class girls remains a big challenge. Austerity budgeting has rolled back many of the gains made for women, and spending cuts tend to be in areas that increase the burden of the responsibility for social reproduction in the household that impacts directly on women.

The struggle to dismantle patriarchy, to transform the marginal role of



FSAW leaders Lillian Ngoyi, Rahima Moosa (left), Helen Joseph (second from right) and Sophie Williams carry anti-pass petitions into the Union Buildings

women in the occupational division of labour in all sectors of the economy into a central role, and to transform the women's burden of unpaid reproductive labour in the home and community must go hand in hand with each other and be integrated into our programme of action. While it is necessary that we should have a stronger focus on reproductive labour, on gender-based violence, on equality in the economy and workplace, none of these can be seen alone as a sufficient tool for this revolutionary struggle.

The story of Lillian's early life is informative. Lillian was born in a small village Ga-Matlala outside Pretoria in 1911, the daughter of a mineworker and a washerwoman. With the meagre wages he received, Lillian's father took her through primary school at the Kilnerton Institute in Pretoria, but due to lack of funds she quit school after Std 6 (Grade 8). She went to the City Deep Mine Hospital, where she worked as a probationer. Soon thereafter she got married, but her husband died in the next few

years. Lillian later did some training in nursing, but financially could not pursue that field either. This forced her to work as a machinist in a clothing factory from 1945 to 1956. She joined the Garment Workers' Union, one of the most active unions at the time, led by communist Solly Sachs. Here she developed her determination to struggle for the right of her fellow workers for better conditions and the right of her own people to freedom and justice. Her work in the union should inspire all working-class women to join and be active in your trade union, and where may not be one, form one.

The Suppression of Communism Act of 1950 ushered in widespread repression of union leaders. In 1952, Cde Sachs was forced out of his position of General Secretary of Garment Workers' Union, and about 27000 workers gathered in protest outside Joburg City Hall. The police moved in, arrested Sachs at the start of his speech, and violent confrontation between workers and police

ensued. This confrontation included many women workers being severely beaten, including Lillian Ngoyi, Helen Joseph and Mary Moodley, a leader from SA Coloured People's Organisation on East Rand. This was a clear warning to women – defy the state and you will be treated roughly. This repression came at time of an upswell of political activism by women in response to threat of passes, and the defiance campaign, but without the trade unions of that time, many working-class women would never have found the means to participate in the women's movement of the 1950s. Today we call on women workers in the formal economy, in the public service and public sector, and in the informal economy to take your place in the ranks of the Women's League, take your organisations into the Progressive Women's Movement, and join the communist party to strengthen the struggle against patriarchy and for gender equality in all spheres of society from a working class perspective.

Lillian's background was largely apolitical. Her family's answer to the hardships and inequalities they experienced was to seek comfort and hope in religion. Increasingly this failed to satisfy Ngoyi and for her the Defiance Campaign in which thousands of people participated in defying all apartheid institutions, offered a dynamic, political alternative. She was arrested for using whites-only post office facilities. This campaign was also an important stimulus for the ANC Women's League in key areas of Rand where she played an important role, and Eastern Cape, with many new recruits entering politics.

Ngoyi rose rapidly within the ANC post 1952. Her flair for public speaking was soon discovered and she became a regular feature on ANC platforms. She had a natural gift as an organiser and a simple, down to earth but dynamic personality. She won the hearts of the thousands of ANC members and supporters, particularly women, who saw in MaNgoyi a true example of what a worker, a housewife, a mother and a daughter can achieve for the liberation of our people.

In 1953 the Transvaal Women's League organised an International Working Women's Day event for first time, taking over the function from the now banned CPSA. This signalled a willingness of the Women's League to take



One of the many women's anti-pass protests leading to the massive march on the Union Buildings on 9 September 1956

a more active lead in organising women to promote greater awareness of their position in society.

MaNgoyi was active in the formation of the non-racial and broad Federation of South African Women (FSAW) launched in April 1954. Here she worked shoulder to shoulder with many communist women – Ray Alexander, Dora Tamana, Josie Mpama, among others. The concept of a broad, non-racial, and working class oriented women's movement had long been considered in the debates in the CPSA, which had a strong focus on organising working class women in the 1940s. Women activists recognised that not every woman was interested in joining the ANC, and that in fact, some women were afraid of it, so they wanted an organisation that would involve all women – church women, trade union women and as well as women from the Congress organisations – the Women's League, the South African Indian Congress, the SA Coloured People's Organisation and Congress of Democrats. MaNgoyi became one of the four national vice-presidents of the

Federation by virtue of her being President of the Transvaal branch. At FSAW's founding conference Lillian Ngoyi was applauded when she complained that if husbands had not kept back their wives there would have been many more delegates present, saying: "The husbands talked of democracy but did not practice it." She also spoke strongly against Bantu Education system that the apartheid regime was imposing, saying: "Bantu education makes African women like fowls laying their eggs for others to take away and do what they like with."

MaNgoyi was elected on the NEC of the ANC in 1955, elected President of the ANC Women's League in 1956, and elected president of the federation at the second conference in August 1956. Drum magazine recognised her as one of "the new tough type of women leaders, the woman factory worker who is tough as granite on the outside, but soft and compassionate deep in her..."

The FSAW recognised the need to

send tested cadres of the revolutionary movement to foreign countries to further explain our struggle and to rally international support and solidarity with our struggle from democratic and peace-loving forces the world over. Lillian Ngoyi and Dora Tamana were selected to attend the World Congress of Mothers organised by the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) in Lausanne, Switzerland. While abroad for eight months, she and Cde Tamana visited the headquarters of the WIDF, based in the German Democratic Republic – the GDR was one of several socialist countries, including the Soviet Union and China, they visited. They also visited sites of the Nazi extermination camps and returned to South Africa with renewed fervour to fight for the freedom of all humanity. On her return Cde Ngoyi went on a speaking tour across the country, rallying thousands into the Congress movement, and giving her impressions about what she had seen abroad. She held large audiences spell-bound for more than two or three hours at a time!



From 1965, successive banning orders prevented MaNgoyi from working, forcing her to make ends meet by private dressmaking at her Orlando home

In August 1955, the FSAW had its own Congress of Mothers for a report-back. Helen Joseph told the meeting that she had joined a Black Sash organised protest at Union Buildings against passes for African women. This spurred Margaret Gazo, a veteran of Women's League, to propose from the floor that since black women had not been invited to join the protest, they should organise own protest. This led to the mobilisation for a protest on 27 October 1955 by the Transvaal FSAW. This took place against all odds. The Pretoria City Council refused permission for meeting, so a lawyer advised that each woman would have her own signed petition and just happen to all go to Union Buildings in at same time. Then the bus licenses were refused, so women had to use public transport. Between 1 000 and 2 000 women came together in this first non-racial women's protest. The protest was led by Lillian Ngoyi, Helen Joseph, Rahima Moosa and Sophie Williams. Carrying the individual signed protests, they ducked through guards and put documents outside cabinet minister's

offices when ministers refused to see them.

At this time the anti-pass campaign was intense. In January 1956, MaNgoyi addressed a huge gathering of 6 000 men and women in Port Elizabeth on the anti-pass campaign, from the back of a truck. In early 1956, Cde Ruth First found out that the government was to begin issuing reference books to women in Winburg in the Free State and began a media campaign to block the move. MaNgoyi, then newly elected National President of the ANC Women's League, skipped into the district and held a meeting with the Winburg women. At the meeting they also had a report back from the delegate who had attended the ANC-organised Anti-Pass Conference held in Johannesburg in early April 1956. Spurred by the presence of their national leader, the women decided spontaneously that the only response to the newly-issued passes was to burn them. The next day they collected a pile of reference books (passes) marched to the magistrate's office and publicly torched the lot.

The experience of the 1955 October March led to the FSAW deciding to mobilise for a national event. MaNgoyi and scores of other women leaders, including Helen Joseph, Dorothy Nyembe, Frances Baard, Sophie Williams, Dora Tamana, Lillian Deidericks, set out to organise women across the country for the demonstration against the extension of the hated pass laws to women. Ngoyi and Joseph were called by senior Congress leaders to secret meeting, secret because many of them were banned, in week before 1956 protest and asked if they were aware of the responsibility for gathering of thousands of women in face of possible police interference, and what would happen if as leaders they were arrested.

Testimony to the determination and courage of these women leaders, MaNgoyi's response was that "other leaders would take our place". On 9 August 1956, while Prime Minister JG Strijdom remained out of sight, 20000 women led by Lillian Ngoyi, overflowed the amphitheatre of the Union Buildings, stood for silence for 30 minutes then sang *Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika*, rocking the cabinet and the country as a whole, to the realisation that African women said no to passes. So powerful was the march that a year later, in 1957, the first women's day was celebrated, with women holding widespread meetings, and deputations of women descending on native commissioner's offices across the country.

Ever brave, Lillian Ngoyi visited Zeerust area during the anti-pass campaign and unrest of 1967 which had seen deaths and many fleeing the violence. She secretly met with women. The FSAW had organised funding for bail and legal defence, provided by Shulamith Muller, a communist and member of COD.

At the 1959 Women's League conference, Cde Ngoyi provided leadership in responding to the anxiety of the women for continued action, while respecting respect for the leading role of the ANC in campaign: "It is important to understand that the struggle against passes is controlled directly by the ANC. The struggle of the women is merely part of the general struggle of the African people ... Nothing must be done to curb the initiative of the women; at the same

time, women must discuss each stage of the campaign of the mother body. The impression seems to be gaining ground that the women are courageous and militant while men sit frightened and timid; this idea is harmful to the internal discipline and harmony [which] now should exist.” This relationship between autonomous women’s action and male dominance in organisations remains an ever present challenge.

On behalf of FSAW, in 1957 MaNgoyi raised her voice during an appeal for funds in support of left journalism, saying that “*New Age*¹ is the only newspaper which fearlessly presents to the world the truth about the conditions of the oppressed people in South Africa.” She paved the way for us by showing that fund raising for the movement is an important political task, much as it is today. There is another anecdote of how Cdes Walter Sisulu and Alfred Nzo went to MaNgoyi’s house for a fundraising party, only to have the Security Police arrest all three of them for breaking their banning orders – they faced three days in jail, then the charges were dropped!

The apartheid regime metered out brutal harassment and suppression of leading activists. MaNgoyi was one of those who was a victim of this constant intimidation. In December 1956 she was arrested and stood trial in the Treason Trial along with 156 leaders. She was detained for five months during the 1960 State of Emergency. At the collapse of the Treason Trial in 1961, Lillian Ngoyi and Helen Joseph were the only women trialists left.

The banning of organisations and state of emergency was severe. But in 1961, the FSAW showed signs of revival. Innovatively, they established community based clubs, called Save Our Families Clubs, among African women, with the intention that these could affiliate to FSAW and replace the now

i. *New Age* was a progressive, anti-apartheid newspaper founded in 1954 and banned in 1963. Ruth First, Govan Mbeki and Brian and Sonya Bunting were among the underground communists to serve on its editorial board. Editions of *New Age* can be found at: <https://disa.ukzn.ac.za/new-age-1954-1963>. The paper was a successor to Congress-aligned papers banned by the apartheid government, *The Guardian* and *Advance*. It had no connection to the newspaper of the same name launched in 2010 by the Gupta brothers.



MaNgoyi in her heyday - a powerful national voice for the ANC and president of the ANC Women’s League

banned ANC Women’s League. Lillian Ngoyi continued to be active in FSAW in this period, and in particular spoke out at the September 1961 FSAW conference, against white women forming pistol clubs in response to the launching of armed struggle, as a disgrace to womanhood and anti-peace. Banning orders were imposed on FSAW leaders in 1962, including Lillian Ngoyi – who had a 10-year banning order slapped on her – Helen Joseph, and Florence Matomela (Eastern Cape). This impacted negatively on the work of the Federation, which was planning for a conference in 1963.

In early 1969, Cdes Joyce Sikhakhane and Rita Ndzanga approached Lillian Ngoyi, at the request of Cde Winnie Mandela, telling they wished to join the underground. The two comrades had already approached and been turned down by Albertina Sisulu who also advised them that their profile was too high to be involved in the underground. It is reported that MaNgoyi bluntly said “You Joyce, when the security police

give you electric shocks to in your genitals, what will you do? Can you guarantee that you will not talk?” She cautioned the two women against getting involved in reckless activities. They ignored the advice of the two veteran leaders and were arrested and detained along with 22 activists under the detention-without-trial clause (Section 6) of the Terrorism Act. But despite her advice to others to be cautious, MaNgoyi’s ongoing involvement in political activity was unshaken.

MaNgoyi’s first 10-year ban elapsed at a time when a new generation had emerged and was carrying on the struggle from the ranks of the black consciousness movement. Many leaders of these movements sought MaNgoyi’s advice on numerous issues and asked her to address their meetings. She was readily available for any task put before her, undaunted by the constant harassment she was facing. Not surprisingly, her banning orders were renewed in 1975. Unable to work because of her bans, she continued to do private dressmaking at her Orlando home to make ends meet.



Women, women everywhere: 20 000 women anti-pass marchers on 9 August 1956 overflow the Union Buildings' amphitheatre

When Cde Bram Fischer, Chairperson of the SACP, died on 8 May 1975, Cde Lillian Ngoyi sent a message to his funeral. As a Treason Trialist she had been defended by Bram Fischer. She made it clear that the meaning of Bram's life extended much further than the walls of Pretoria Local Prison or the white world from which he had come. "We, the blacks of South Africa, mourn the death of a statesman, a hero of the liberation struggle... With the change that will come in the years ahead, our children will know that South Africa bore a son like you. Blacks everywhere dedicate themselves to carry on from where you have left off. We bear in mind today the men of Robben Island and all political prisoners. Bram, we will always remember you." The bonds between her and Bram Fischer, between her and Helen Joseph who chose to lie beside her friend in death, reflect the very deep non-racialism of our movement. This too is something we should reflect on as we build our democratic South African nation.

In her last years, Ma Lillian Ngoyi, living in Mzimhlophe, was still banned.

Her house was close to where Cde Albertina Sisulu worked and MaNgoyi would sometimes slip in as a patient to see her. After her death following a short illness, MaSisulu and MaJoseph, both banned, had to apply for permission to attend Lillian's funeral – true to their racism, apartheid security bosses granted permission to Helen Joseph but not Albertina Sisulu.

As we reflect in 2022 on her life of dedication and unpretentiousness, her selflessness and her devotion to the cause of freedom, we find a shining example not only to the women of South Africa but to women of the world. She was able to combine her role as a widowed mother of two, the sole support of her ageing mother, with ongoing work as an activist and leader of organisations. Now as we face challenges in our national democratic revolution, as we struggle against unemployment and poverty, against the impact of climate change, against the scourges of crime, violence, substance abuse and other manifesta-

tions of the crisis of social reproduction and as we fight to defeat the Covid-19 pandemic, this is a life, this is a leader who we should hold up as a beacon of how we should be in society.

As we move towards our 15th Congress in July, where we will refine our strategic perspectives and tasks for the South African road to socialism, we call for the building of meaningful black working women's leadership in all economic sectors (both productive and reproductive) in not less than the proportions of women working in each sector; for strengthening the role of women workers in all levels of new emerging forms of work in the fourth industrial revolution (platform economy, gig economy, etc) and for the development of a socialist policy on sex work in consultation with organised sex workers in South Africa and internationally.

The task of fighting patriarchy is not only an exclusive reserve for women within the Party but requires the entire SACP in full commitment. A solid and measurable programme must emerge and be embedded to every aspect of

the programmatic pursuit of the Party. In all our seven key sites of power as enunciated in the South African road to socialism, the fight against patriarchy must be asserted to loom large as a particular and specific enhancement of that key site of power. Red October campaigns must be gendered in their outlook, as a permanent feature of the SACP. If gendering a campaign or programme is not taken seriously at all levels of the Party, this must automatically disqualify such a programme as completely implemented, until it shows vividly how it impacts on improving the lives and status of women in society, especially the working class women. It is this rigidity that will superimpose the responsibility of women's struggles to every member of the communist party, without a choice.

Party structures, with our allies, must seek to influence policy and programmatic work and direction of the Department of Women, Youth and People With Disabilities and the Gender Equality Commission.

We must also mobilise and campaign with all national and regional single-issue activists' civil society gender organisations. Some of these are doing a lot of work on gender-based violence (GBV); some are focused on gender and lands rights in rural communities; and others on children's rights. The Party must galvanise these organs of people's power under the common solid platform and offer support system for purposes of wider buy-in. The Party, with the YCLSA, must resurrect the sanitary dignity campaign and robustly engage the Department of Basic Education to formalise the supply of free sanitary towels to the schools located in poverty-stricken communities, such as those classified as No-Fee Schools. No girl must be out of school because of non-affordability of sanitary towels. We must collectively elevate economic struggles for women in the economy, including taking up struggles for women to occupy leadership and executive positions in the corporate sector in line with the provisions of the B-BBEE Act, while also ensuring solidarity support and participation in ongoing trade union workshops to capacitate shop stewards and worker leaders for them to be able to continue advocating for



As in life ... When Helen Joseph died in 1992, she was buried in Avalon cemetery in Soweto, alongside her lifelong comrade, Lillian Ngoyi

the workers. We must take forward the battle of ideas and the programmes for young women development, violence awareness, HIV-Aids workshops, against sexual harassment, and for trainer education workshops, just to mention a few.

Our posture as the SACP is that the social emancipation of South African women is not possible under capitalism. What it requires is embedded gender equality and anti-patriarchal struggle in the organs of people's power from community level to the state, in the family and cultural institutions, in the education and training sector, in the economy and world of work, and in the building of the socialist institutions and practices.

The struggle against patriarchal

oppression and gender inequality is far from over. We commit to build on the shoulders of communist and progressive women who have gone before us, in full appreciation of the class and national content of the gender struggle and the gender content of the class and national struggles. True to their contributions, we will ensure that women are never relegated or pigeonholed to particular roles and tasks in society. This struggle we take forward in the name of our heroine Lillian Masediba Ngoyi, among others, who continues to inspire and guide us through her extraordinary life and contribution to our freedom.

*Malibongwe lamakhosikazi!
Put people before profit!
Socialism is the future build it now!*