

Thibedi, Thibedi William (1888–1960)

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Thibedi, Thibedi William (1888–1960), South African revolutionary syndicalist and Communist, was born in 1888 at Vereeniging, now in Gauteng province, South Africa. The eldest son of the Reverend Jeremiah Molefe Thibedi's five children, he trained as a school teacher and taught at a mission school for blacks before beginning a career in left-wing politics.

In Johannesburg, Thibedi joined the revolutionary syndicalist International Socialist League (ISL) in 1916—becoming its first major African leader. The ISL proposed an interracial mass movement—“One Big Union”—that would abolish capitalism as well as “all forms of native indenture, compound and passport systems.” Thibedi was involved in its Manifesto (or Solidarity) Committee union reform initiative, led the Johannesburg IWA (a syndicalist, all-African, ISL-linked union) from 1918 to 1920, and was active in the 1919 Witwatersrand antipass campaign. In line with ISL policy, he rejected nationalism and was sceptical of the South African Native National Congress, founded in 1912, which after 1923 became known as the African National Congress (ANC).

In 1921 Thibedi was a founder member of the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA), which incorporated the ISL and other left-wing parties; he organized pro-Communist Africans at Natspruit at Alberton. Unlike the ISL, the early CPSA had a narrow focus on white workers, but when that policy changed after 1924, Thibedi worked at a new party night school for Africans in Johannesburg. He wrote African language articles, recruited people like Moses Kotane (later CPSA general-secretary) to the night school, served on the political bureau (as its first person of color), and became a full-time Communist organizer from 1927.

Thibedi was also a shop steward in the semi-syndicalist, semi-[Marcus] Garveyite Industrial and Commercial Workers Union at Viljoen's Drift . When the union expelled CPSA members (1926), he addressed local Industrial and Commercial Workers Union groups at Vereeniging and Pretoria and recruited disgruntled members. As a party organizer, he established CPSA branches in the southeastern Transvaal. In 1927 Thibedi and fellow Communist Bennie Weinbren formed unions among urban African workers. These were united into the Federation of Non-European Trade Unions (FNETU) in 1928; Thibedi worked as its chief organizer. FNETU demanded equal pay for equal work and an end to racial discrimination. It claimed ten thousand members in nine sectors. Envisaged as a “red” union (in line with the New Line [1928–1935] position of the Communist International, which forbade cooperation with

non-Communists), it joined the Red International of Labour Unions and the International Labour Defence.

Various laws hampered militants. Thibedi was prosecuted repeatedly c. 1928: after speaking to a rally of one thousand workers at Potchefstroom location, at a meeting at Paardekop township, Standerton, and during a strike involving FNETU's Native Clothing Workers' Union. In 1927, he was a CPSA executive member and in 1929 a leader in its moderate League of African Rights front. Meanwhile, he applied for a passport to visit Britain and Germany, apparently intending to enroll in the Communist University of the Toilers of the East, Moscow. All applications to travel abroad were blocked. In 1929, Thibedi became FNETU general-secretary (and also secretary of all affiliated unions); Kotane was vice-chair.

Relations with the CPSA soured. In line with Comintern directives, the party adopted the "Native Republic" thesis, which effectively made the party's immediate agenda capitalist democracy, not socialist revolution. The party majority initially opposed this approach—Thibedi remained in opposition even after the thesis was formally adopted by the CPSA. In this, he was backed *inter alia* by FNETU.

The New Line aimed at "Bolshevisation" and purification. Thibedi was the first major figure purged (in late 1929/early 1930); a rebellion in FNETU members saw him reinstated there until 1931. In 1930, with S. P. Bunting (purged in 1931), he formed the first African Mineworkers' Union. If the New Line produced many important innovations, it also led to the closure of the League of African Rights, the decline of FNETU, and a declining party characterized by intolerance, dogmatism, and deep racial divisions.

Thibedi formed a small (and short-lived) Communist League of Africa/Communist Party of Africa, which corresponded with Leon Trotsky in 1932. Never quite theoretically Trotskyist, it nonetheless distributed the American Trotskyist Militant and related material. From offices in Berea Street, Johannesburg, it claimed the support of several FNETU affiliates, reported making progress in other sectors, notably mining, and produced the paper *Maraphanga*.

When the CPSA adopted the Popular Front approach in 1935, stressing maximum unity, Thibedi was among the veteran leaders who rejoined. He was involved in the "Friends of Abyssinia" front and was secretary of the revived African Mineworkers Union. In the 1940s, he drifted back into Trotskyist circles, joining the Workers' International League (fl. 1944), which led an opposition caucus in the CPSA-led Council of Non-European Trade Unions (fl. 1941). However, he was expelled from the League some time before its dissolution in 1946; he refused CPSA overtures to rejoin.

Thibedi died at Pretoria in 1960, where he lived in the Eersterus freehold township. He was survived by his wife, Monica, and five children. Their home was served with a notice of expropriation in 1959: Eersterus was to become a Coloured Group Area under apartheid law.

Too unorthodox for the CPSA and too distant from the ANC, Thibedi's central role in labor and the left has been downplayed. This may be starting to change: the Congress of South African Trade Unions resolved in 2006 to consider a "workers' monument" to the "worker hero" Thibedi.

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