

Tribute to a true comrade

Wilson Sidina: fearless struggle icon

By Ryland Fisher

When someone like Wilson Sidina dies, it is almost like a part of our history dies with him. He leaves a void that goes much deeper than the loss of an individual. It erodes the memory of the people who became involved in the struggle because of noble goals and not because they wanted to enrich themselves.

Sidina, who passed away at the age of 81 at the end of July 2023 after a long illness, in many ways encapsulated what it means to be a comrade, a term that has lost some of its value in recent years because of the crime and corruption conducted by people who call themselves by that name.

But Sidina was one of those who deserved to be called a comrade, because he embraced the values of non-racialism, unity, ubuntu, cooperation and selflessness that informs most of the decisions and actions of true comrades. And he lived it until the end.

An unheralded struggle icon who lived most of his life in Gugulethu, Cape Town, Sidina was one of a group of leaders in Cape Town's African townships who embraced nonracialism and served the ANC loyally until his passing – despite some misgivings in recent years.

Sidina was a prominent activist who was involved in civics, trade unions and progressive sport organisations and who also recruited many young people to join the military wing of the ANC, Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), during the struggle. Those who were involved with him – some younger, some older – included people such as Oscar Mpetha, Zoli Malindi, Christmas Tinto, Annie Silinga, Mama Mtiya, Mama Holo, Mildred Lesea, Alpheus Ndude and Mziwonke Pro Jack. Of these, I think only Mildred Lesea, who turned 90 a few months ago, is still alive.

My first interaction with Sidina was in 1980. I was a young reporter at the *Cape Herald* and the newspaper reported quite prominently on the meat workers' strike, which led to a red meat boycott in order to put pressure on the employers to give into the wage demands of the striking workers.

Sidina was one of the organisers of the General Workers' Union who mobilised the workers at the Maitland Abattoir. He realised that all tactics could only work for a limited time frame, and this also applied to the meat boycott. He gave me my first scoop as a young reporter: the suspension of the meat boycott. It was a tough decision for the strike organisers but with hindsight it was the right decision at the time.

Sidina, a union organiser and also an activist, believed in supporting community and workers' struggles irrespective of where they took place. In the

early 1980s he was involved in the Wilson Rowntree strike and boycott, the Leyland workers' strike, and the schools and bus boycotts.

My interactions with Sidina were plentiful over the past four decades, mainly as an activist but also as a journalist. He was one of the first people I would contact if I was confused by decisions taken by the township leadership on any issue. He always took the time to explain their position on the issue to me.

Sidina was at the forefront of trying to resolve many conflicts in the townships, including in Crossroads where a violent war had raged between Johnson Ngxobongwana's "witdoeke" and the rival group led by Oliver Memani.

Sidina was one of those leaders who believed that one could not only play a political role, but one had to be involved in various strata of society.

He had played rugby as a young man and was considered one of the best flank forwards of his generation. He was one of the founder members of the Fly Eagle Rugby Club in Nyanga and later he became involved in sports administration.

After the banning of the ANC and other organisations in 1960, he played a major role in recruiting young people to join MK in exile. Many of his recruits came from the various sports clubs with which he was involved.

Sidina was among hundreds of activists in the Western Cape who were detained during the state of emergency in 1985. When he was released in 1986, he was slapped with a five-year banning order.

After the ANC was unbanned in 1990, Sidina became the first chairperson of the ANC branch in Section 4, Gugulethu and served the ANC in many other capacities.

After South Africa became a democracy and the ANC leadership returned from exile, Sidina was one of those who were never fully recognised for the role they played in the struggle. He became an ANC councillor in the City of Cape Town for many years, but he could have done much more.

The last time I saw Sidina was at Alpheus Ndude's 80th birthday. He expressed some unhappiness with the state of our democracy. We agreed we would have a catch-up soon, but that never happened.

It was clear to me then that he was no longer as healthy as he used to be, even though he still displayed some of his normal wit.

I am sorry we never had our catch-up meeting. I really wanted to hear what he thought has gone wrong with our democracy.



**John S. Saul (1938-2023)**

We mourn the death of John Saul, inspirational supporter of African liberation, embodiment of international solidarity, tough critic of all forms of discrimination and oppression.