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Elias Motsoaledi was born in Sekhukhuneland, South Africa, in 1924, the third of eight children. Coming to Johannesburg for work at 17, Motsoaledi worked in a leather factory from 1943, joined the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) in 1945, the African National Congress (ANC) in 1948, and the Leather Workers' Union in 1949, and was fired for his union work. The ANC, the country's main African nationalist organization, was adopting an increasingly confrontational position and developing into a mass-based party, and Motsoaledi was one of several CPSA members elected to its Transvaal executive. He was involved in the Council of Non-European Trade Unions (CNETU): formed in 1941 with 100,000 members, CNETU was led by CPSA activists and reached perhaps 150,000 members by the close of World War II (Alexander 2000). CNETU split in 1947 in the wake of the failed general strike launched by its affiliate, the African Mineworkers' Union, but played an important role in the national day of protest against the Suppression of Communism Act in 1950. Motsoaledi was elected CNETU chairman in 1953. The CPSA meanwhile dissolved, and was replaced by the underground South African Communist Party (SACP) in 1953.

The 1950s saw the “Congress Alliance” – ANC, the Colored People’s Congress, the (white) Congress of Democrats, and the Indian National Congress – organize civil disobedience campaigns, including the Defiance Campaign of 1952, in which Motsoaledi was active. The 1950s also saw substantial realignments in the local labor movement. In 1955, the remaining CNETU unions and the left-wing faction of the South African Trades and Labor Council, which had been splintering from 1947, formed the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) in 1955. SACTU started with 31 affiliates and 32,000 members (Lambert 1988). Motsoaledi was a key figure in the federation, which had close links to the Congress Alliance and promoted interracial unionism, organized general strikes in 1957 and 1958, and claimed 53,000 members by 1961.

The 1950s were characterized by growing repression, and Motsoaledi was among those affected. He was banned from holding union office in terms of the Suppression of Communism Act, and detained during the large-scale arrests of the state of emergency declared in the aftermath of the Sharpeville Massacre of March 21, 1960, and imprisoned for four months. The ANC was declared an unlawful organization and banned in April, SACTU playing a key role in organizing a general strike in protest. In June 1961, the ANC and the SACP shifted from their previous emphasis on non-violence and organized an armed group, *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (“Spear of the Nation”), which undertook various acts of sabotage from December onwards. SACTU was not banned, but the climate of repression and the growing involvement of key SACTU figures like Motsoaledi in *Umkhonto we Sizwe* contributed to its virtual collapse inside the country by the mid-1960s. Motsoaledi was detained in 1963 under new 90-day detention laws, and was sentenced to life imprisonment at the 1963 –4 Rivonia trial for his underground activities. When the ANC was legalized in 1990, Motsoaledi was elected to its national executive in 1991, having served 26 years on the Robben Island prison. He died in 1994.

References and Suggested Readings

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