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Voice of the South African Working Class

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Celebrating the centenary of the birth of Vuyisile Mini

In memory of Vuyisile Mini, let us organise the unorganised and build working class unity, power and hegemony; let us move the national democratic revolution on to a second, more radical phase towards complete freedom and social emancipation.

Hundred years ago on 8 April 1920, a giant of our revolution, the Organiser of the unorganised, Vuyisile Mini, was born in Tsomo, Eastern Cape. The SACP dips our banner once more to this revolutionary hero – a man who faced with the hang-man's noose refused save himself by giving evidence against Cde Wilton Mkwayi, and went to the gallows issuing a powerful political message and singing in his powerful bass voice. His courage, his dedication to our revolution has inspired and will continue to inspire generations of Communists.

He moved to Korsten, Port Elizabeth (PE) at the age of 22, and lived there in a non-racial community until forced by the apartheid government to move to Kwa-Zakhele as they imposed racial segregation. He was active in struggles around rent, bus fares and forced removals, the burning problems that his community faced.

Vuyisile Mini joined his father working in the docks. His experience as a dockworker led him into the trade union movement, where over the years he established and worked for various trade unions, resulting in him being known as "Organiser of the unorganised", and forever fighting for the interests of the workers. The conditions in the docks in PE led him to organise the dockworkers strike at his own workplace, and to fight against the use of convicts as scab labour during the strike. Comrade Mini led the unions into the frontline of the struggles against forced removals, passes and Bantu education. He led bus boycotts and demonstrations against repression.

For Cde Vuyisile the Alliance was not a theoretical concept. Apart from his activity in the unions, he was active in the ANC, the SACP, South African Congress of Trade Unions (Sactu) and uMkhonto weSizwe, the MK. He joined the ANC in 1944. As the first African in PE to march into a whites only station in the 1952 Defiance Campaign,

he was arrested and served three months in Rooi Hel Prison along with Govan Mbeki and Raymond Mhlaba. One of many arrests!

Mini was actively involved in the formation of Sactu, launched on 5 March 1955 at an inaugural conference in Johannesburg. The creation of SACTU constituted a first attempt by the working people to build a giant non-racial trade union coordinating centre, fighting for the common class interests of workers of all races, all sexes and all colours. Sactu never confined itself to workplace issues but was involved in the political struggle against the national oppression of all Black people in South Africa – Africans, Indians and Coloureds. Sactu's founding declaration of principles are just as relevant today as then.

Cde Vuyisile was tasked by Sactu to organise the metal workers. He subsequently became the metalworkers union Secretary. Together with another activist, Stephen Tobia, they founded the African Painting and Building Union, which embarked in the 1950s on one of the longest protests for a wage increase and fought against the use of convicts for strike breaking. Sactu membership grew from 20 000 in 19 unions in 1956 to 53 000 in 51 unions in 1961 – a reflection of the role that comrades like Vuyisile Mini played in organising the workers.

Sactu joined in the Congress Alliance comprising the ANC, South African Indian Congress, Coloured People's Congress and Congress of Democrats, with the Communist Party operating in underground conditions and its leaders and members active in all, and others even leading, the legally operating Congress Alliance formations. It is this liberation movement that was at the forefront of the effort to organise the Congress of the People and write the Freedom Charter, which was adopted by the congress in Kliptown on 26 June of the same year Sactu was born. Mini encouraged unionists to fight oppression and exploitation in the workplace, lead street committees and community organisations for better houses, swell the ranks of the MK and form the backbone of the ANC and SACP structures.

He took his place amongst those arrested and charged in Treason Trial in 1956 until case collapsed on 20 April 1959. The trial had 24 Sactu leaders amongst the 156 arrested. Mini was recruited into the underground SACP which led to his arrest in 1960. On his release, during the same year, he was appointed as the Eastern Cape Secretary of Sactu.

Vuyisile Mini was deeply involved in organising the underground work of the ANC after its banning in 1960 and, as a communist activist, was of the people who supported the ANC pursuing the Armed Struggle. In 1961, he was summoned to Johannesburg by the ANC where he was briefed about the launch of the MK on 16 of December that year. He and two of his comrades were appointed to the Eastern Cape MK high command – Vuyisile as political commissar, Cde Wilson Khayinga as the commander, and Cde Zinakile Mkhamba as the chief of logistics.

Apart from all of this, Cde Vuyisile was a gifted actor, dancer, poet and singer, a prominent member of the PE male voice choir. We salute him as composer of many Freedom Songs, including the song *Thatha unmtswalo Buti siqoduke balindile o mama nobab ekhaya*, composed during the Treason Trial meaning "Take up your things brother and lets go, they are waiting, out mothers and fathers, at home"; and

one of the most popular liberation songs of the 1950's '*pasopa nansindod' emyama we Verwoed*' – look out Verwoed, here are the Black people.

Cde Vuyisile was also a loving husband and father. In 1945 he married Nohombile Ruth Mini in PE. They were blessed with five children – Xolile, their first born, himself an activist and arrested quite a few times; Nkosazana, who passed away in 2006; Mzuvukile, still living in PE. The fourth child, Nomkhosi, herself a member of the MK and co-founder of the ANC cultural group AMANDLA, was killed by the South African apartheid government in Lesotho in December 1985. She had survived a March 1979 South African Defence Force attack on the Novo Catengue camp in Angola. The last born, Nonqaba, is currently living in Kempton Park, Gauteng Province.

Mini was arrested on 10 May 1963 along with comrades Wilson Khayinga and Zinakile Mkaba and they were charged with 17 counts of sabotage and other political crimes including alleged complicity in the January 1963 death of Siphon Mange, an alleged police informer. In March 1964, they were sentenced to death. They took the case on appeal and lost.

Cde Vuyisile, a dedicated combatant to the end, went to the Gallows on 6 November 1964, having rejected an offer made to him on death row by the apartheid police to save himself by giving evidence against others and having issued defiant statement on the eve of hanging that resounded through the cells of Pretoria Prison. The late Cde Ben Turok, a previous co-accused of Mini in the 1956 Treason Trial, was serving a three-year term in Pretoria Prison for MK activities at the time of Mini's execution. He recalled the last moments of Mini. He wrote in Sechaba, the official ANC journal:

'The last evening was devastatingly sad as the heroic occupants of the death cells communicated to the prison in gentle melancholy song that their end was near.....it was late at night when the singing ceased, and the prison fell into uneasy silence. I was already awake when the singing began again in the early morning. Once again the excruciatingly beautiful music floated through the barred windows, echoing round the brick exercise yard, losing itself in the vast prison yards. And then, unexpectedly, the voice of Vuyisile Mini came roaring down the hushed passages. Evidently standing on a stool, with his face reaching up to a barred venting his cell, his unmistakable bass voice was enunciating his final message in Xhosa to the world his was leaving. In a voice charged with emotion but stubbornly defiant he spoke of the struggle waged by the African National Congress and of his absolute conviction of the victory to come. And then it was Khayinga's turn, followed by Mkaba, as they too defied all prison rules to shout out their valedictions. Soon after I heard the door of their cell being opened. Murmuring voices reached my straining ears, and then the three martyrs broke into a final poignant melody which seemed to fill the whole prison with sound and then gradually faded away into the distant depth of the condemned Section.'

The apartheid prison treated the bodies of our heroes without respect, refusing to return the bodies to families for proper burial. Mini and his comrades were buried in a paupers' grave in Rebecca St Cemetery in Pretoria. His body was exhumed and reburied as a Freedom Struggle Hero at the eMlotheni Memorial Park, New Brighton township, PE in 1998. This hero of our revolution was saluted by the ANC in exile

when the ANC Mission Office in Tanzania opened a Furniture factory that was known as the Vuyisile Mini Factory, the VMF. On 6 November 2010, PE's Market Square was renamed Vuyisile Mini Square.

The SACP calls on all Communists, the trade union movement and working class as a whole to salute Cde Vuyisile Mini in 2020 by recruiting workers into trade unions, in engaging in political education of the working class, particularly in but not limited to the trade union movement, in re-building the strength of our progressive trade union movement and its federation. Let us make 2020 the year for organising the unorganised in salute of a revolutionary giant, who did not flinch in his commitment even as he faced the apartheid hangman.

Long live the undying spirit of Cde Vuyisile Mini! Organise the Unorganised!

Celebrating the centenary of the birth of Brian Bunting

In memory of Brian Bunting, let's pick up his pen, journalist and editorial skills; let's fight the battle of ideas against the capitalism and imperialism, its neoliberal iteration, and corruption and looting that seek to derail our national democratic revolution.

We dip our revolutionary banner and salute Comrade Brian Bunting, who was born on this day, 9 April, in 1920, exactly 100 years ago, in Johannesburg. Amongst other contributions, Comrade Brian used his intellectual prowess and his journalist skills, to strengthen the Communist Party's contribution to the battle of ideas in our revolution. We salute Cde Brian, our stalwart journalist, thinker and editor over decades of our revolution's history! Now more than ever, the battle of ideas against global imperialism, corruption and state looting and neoliberalism needs to be intensified.

Brian Bunting matriculated at 15 and graduated from Wits University in 1939, where he had already begun his journalist and editing career publishing a student newspaper called *Wu's News* and a literary magazine, called *Umpa*. Comrade Brian's ability as a leader was also recognised at this early stage when he was elected a student representative council president at Wits. After graduating he worked as nightshift sub-editor on the Rand Daily Mail and the Sunday Times while completing his honours thesis.

He joined the Communist Party in 1940 at the age of 20. In this period of the Stalin-Hitler pact, the Party – like our sister parties internationally – condemned Britain's war against Nazi Germany as an 'imperialist war'. Cde Brian refused to serve in a war in which 'two imperial powers were fighting to acquire more territory'. Once Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, however, he enlisted and from 1942 served in North Africa and Italy as an air mechanic and information officer during the rest of the Second World War.

Returning home at the end of the War, in 1946 Cde Brian was elected to the Johannesburg District Committee of the Communist Party. Like many, including Cde Ruth First, he was active around support for the 1946 Mine Workers strike, resulting in his arrest, but charges against him were subsequently dropped.

In June 1946 the Communist Party asked Bunting to go to Cape Town to assist Cde Radfort, the editor of *The Guardian* newspaper. The start of his long journey in Left and Party publications! He became assistant editor of *The Guardian*, and later took over as chief editor and its successor publications, the *Advance*, *Clarion*, *Peoples' World*, and *New Age*, which was published in Cape Town (except during the 1960 emergency) until it was banned in 1962. Bunting served as editor in Cape Town in a journalistic tripod which included Cde Ruth First in Johannesburg and Cde Govan Mbeki in Port Elizabeth.

He left for Cape Town on the same day he married Sonia Isaacman, who had given up her university studies to do full-time political work in the Communist Party. They were to have three children Stephen, Peter and Margie. Until her death in 2001, the Buntings shared a political life in the Party of over 50 years, especially as leaders in the Party apparatus in London between 1963 and their return to South Africa in 1991.

Cde Brian also took his place in organising ex-servicemen into a Left and influential anti-apartheid organisation the Springbok Legion. He served as assistant national secretary of the Springbok Legion, and he edited its mouthpiece, *Fighting Talk*.

The apartheid state after its election in 1948 gave the black majority a sop in the form of three 'native representatives' in Parliament, though they had to be white. To the government's irritation, the black population invariably voted communist or liberal. So when Bunting, already banned under the apartheid regime's Suppression of Communism Act, was returned for the Cape Western district in November 1952 to replace Sam Khan, another Communist – the other candidates losing their deposits. There was barely time for him to deliver his maiden speech in parliament before he was ousted in terms of the anti-Communist legislation in October 1953. Cde Brian had the rare distinction of being expelled from the South African parliament for being a communist, only to be re-elected 41 years later in the country's first democratic elections in 1994 on the ANC-led party-list electoral system of our democracy, nominated by the SACP to do so.

While the repression tightened in the 1950s, Cde Brian and Cde Sonia continued with their Party and Congress of Democrats political activism. He was one in the small group of party members who, in 1953, reconstituted the Party underground. He served on the Central Committee of the Communist Party for more than 50 years.

Comrade Brian was subject to a banning order in 1952, was detained in 1960 in the state of emergency that followed the Sharpeville massacre, was placed under house arrest in 1962 and prohibited from publishing in 1963, when he and his family left for London. His wife Sonia was acquitted in the long-drawn-out Treason Trial of 1956–58.

Cde Brian was integral to the life of the *African Communist* from its first edition in October 1959, taking over as editor in 1972 from Cde Michael Harmel, one of our great intellectuals, and continuing in that role until 1990. Ever the collectivist, he wrote 'As editor of the *African Communist*', I was assisted by an editorial board whose membership varied from time to time but comprised some of the leading figures in the South African Communist Party. Among those I can remember are, in addition to myself, my wife Sonia who managed the journal's London office (in fact

the only office of the SACP anywhere in the world), Rusty Bernstein, Alan Brooks, Mzala, Francis Meli, Ronnie Kasrils, Joe Slovo, Essop Pahad. Party members passing through London would sit in on the committee from time to time. The committee would meet regularly to discuss the political situation and the need to commission articles and also the suitability of articles submitted for publication, as well as the reaction to issues of the journal from the readership.’ The pages of the *African Communist* are also filled with articles written by Cde Brian, under the pen names of Z. Nkosi and Peter Mackintosh.

For his outstanding contribution to journalism, Cde Brain received an award from the International Organisation of Journalists in 1960. Shortly after he was prohibited from publishing in 1963 when he was a writer for the *Spark*, he and Cde Sonia left South Africa for London, where apart from being a journalist and editor, Cde Brian also found time to write books, including *The Rise of the South African Reich* published in 1964 and *Moses Kotane: South African Revolutionary: A Political Biography* published in 1969. He received the Lenin Centenary medal in 1970.

Cde Brian worked as London correspondent for the Soviet news agency, *Tass*, during his decades in exile. He exercised great influence in South African affairs simultaneously as a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, as an editor in London of the SACP journal, the *African Communist* (which was printed in East Germany), and as a senior backroom figure in London in the Anti-Apartheid Movement.

When Cde Brian and Cde Sonia returned home in 1991, they both immediately took up the challenges of building the SACP at home. Cde Brian in particular contributed enormously in the political education of cadres in the Branches being established in the Western Cape, writing short and accessible pieces for example ‘What is a Revolution?’ He took his place in the Central Committee and provided solid guidance to the Party in the period of the assassination of our General Secretary, Cde Chris Hani, in the period of the death of Cde Joe Slovo, and as the SACP engaged with the changing landscape of the early years of democracy.

Bunting’s life did not go unrecognised during his life time. In 2003 he received an award from the newspaper *Satyagraha* for his contribution to liberation struggle. At the 10th National Congress of the SACP held in 1998, he, along with Cde Billy Nair, was the first recipients of the Moses Kotane award.

Cde Brian Bunting passed away in Cape Town on 18 June 2008, seven years after his wife Sonia had passed way in 2001. As we salute Cde Brian today, we call on Communists and Left thinkers alike to pick up his pen and editorial skill and fight the battle of ideas against the capitalism and imperialism, their neoliberal iteration, corruption and looting that seek to derail our national democratic revolution.

Long live the undying spirit of Cde Brian Bunting! Revolutionary writer and editor!

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- *Cde Jenney Shreiner contributed immensely in the writings. She is a Member of the SACP Central Committee and is involved in a project of documenting our history through interactions with our veterans.*

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