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The ordinary Irish workers who stood up against apartheid in South Africa

Last month marked the 34th anniversary of the prison release of Nelson Mandela, the leader of the South African anti-apartheid movement. Learn about an inspirational strike by a small group of Irish workers in support of this historic struggle.

Veronica Munroe tells PCS: "He [Nimrod Sejake] described apartheid like a pint of Guinness: the majority in the glass is black, with the little layer of white on top."

"The majority of people in South Africa were black and there was a small minority of white people. And yet, black people were being oppressed for the colour of their skin. Our minds were blown: because of the colour of your skin?"

This evocative comparison between apartheid in South Africa and a pint of Guinness – the famous Irish stout – was made on a picket line to Irish strikers by Nimrod Sejake, a South African exile and militant trade unionist based in Dublin who had famously shared a cell with Mandela during the infamous Treason Trials.

He was speaking to a group of Irish supermarket workers who had taken a historic stand against the regime of apartheid in South Africa - a brutal system of racial segregation and oppression.

The strikers, who have gone down in Irish trade union history for their principled stance and determination, demonstrated the power of trade unionists to sway public opinion and affect change by showing solidarity with oppressed people across the world.

They even won praise from Nelson Mandela himself. Shortly after his release from prison, he said that the Dunnes Stores workers' stand helped to keep him going during his time in prison.

But how did these workers go from ordinary supermarket workers to heroes of the cause for freedom for black South Africans?

Political awakening

A decision was agreed at the Irish Congress of Trade Unions that union members should not handle South African produce. A trade union, the Irish Distributive and Administrative Trade Union, passed on the instruction to its members that they should boycott any South African products by refusing to process them at tills.

Not long after, Mary Manning, a 21-year-old check-out worker, refused to register the sale of a grapefruit under this directive in support of the anti-apartheid struggle.

After being threatened by management, she and her colleagues refused to capitulate. Not long after, Manning and nine other workers who supported her action (most of whom were women) were suspended with immediate effect.

One of the women who walked out the door in solidarity with Mary Manning was Veronica Munroe, an office worker who was based in a nearby store.

"That day, we went to the store that Mary was suspended from and the rest of us walked out with her," Veronica says. "Before long, we were on an official strike that lasted almost three years."

Although they felt like they were doing the right thing, it wasn't until they met Nimrod Sejake that they began to have a political awakening about the realities of apartheid. He attended the picket every day and gave them information on the nature of this oppressive system.

Public support in Ireland, which was shy at first, grew steadily larger as the months went on. When the legendary anti-apartheid activist Bishop Desmond Tutu met the strikers in London on his way to collect the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo, public opinion swung massively in their favour.

"He told the girls how brave they were and how he would go back to South Africa and spread the news to his parishioners and townships that they were being supported outside of South Africa," she says. "There were people thinking of them and trying to help the situation."

Later, when eight of the strikers and their union official flew to South Africa at the invitation of Tutu, they were barred from entry and deported on the next plane -

in a move which generated outrage across Ireland.

'We woke people up to apartheid'

In the end, the Irish government decided to introduce a ban on the importation of South African fruit and vegetables, making Ireland the first western government to ban South African produce.

But despite their commitment to the cause, Veronica, a single parent, lost her home due to the strike as she couldn't pay her mortgage. As well as holding a three-year picket outside the storefront, the strikers also sought to block the delivery of South African produce, meaning they had to take turns doing night shifts.

This unbelievably strong solidarity was not expressed by many colleagues and the reaction was not always positive from passers by – but they persevered.

Yet the strikers' sacrifice was, according to Veronica, worth it in the end: Nelson Mandela was released from prison in 1990, after which he negotiated a new constitution to abolish apartheid.

Mandela made it a priority of his to meet with the strikers in Dublin in 1990 following his release from prison, telling an Irish crowd that he'd like to "remember the unprecedented stand taken by the Dunnes [Stores] strikers" and that he recognises "the sacrifices they underwent – some of them lost their jobs".

"What we did was minuscule compared to what Nimrod Sejake and his comrades [in the ANC] did," Veronica says. "But we did wake people up to [apartheid] a lot."

What are the lessons Veronica has for PCS members and other trade unionists who want to stand up and fight for oppressed peoples around the world?

"If you have people who are like-minded and want to try and do something to help, don't be afraid to help. Even if you're just one person, you can make a difference," she says.

"Because trade unions are a collective, if you do something, others may take your lead somewhere else - it snowballs, and you will make a difference. That's what happened with us."