

Lucien van der Walt, 2011, "Thibedi, Thibedi William (1888–1960), South African revolutionary syndicalist and Communist," in Emmanuel K. Akyeampong and Henry Louis Gates, Jr (eds.), *Oxford Dictionary of African Biography*, Oxford University Press.

judgment on criteria which bear no relationship to the mentalities of people in the society under consideration. The women of Black Africa have suffered enough from these colonial and neo-colonial attitudes" (*Black Sisters*, p. 80).

Awa Thiam pursued a public service career focused on women's issues in modern Senegal. She is the Director of the National Center for Assistance and Training of Women under the Ministry of Women and Children. She co-founded the Alliance for a New Citizenship in Dakar, and in 1982 she also founded the Commission for the Abolition of Sexual Mutilations, an organization she directs.

Awa Thiam has received numerous honors for her contributions to public life, the arts, and African women's rights. In 1985, she was awarded the French governmental Medal for the Defense of Women's Rights, a distinction that pays tribute to her pioneering efforts in the struggle to eradicate female genital mutilation.

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DIOR KONATÉ

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 Natalspruit 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 semisyn-dicalist, 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.

[See also Bunting, Sidney Percival.]

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Thuku, Harry (1895–1970), Kenyan political leader and farmer, was born in 1895 in Kambui in the British East Africa Protectorate (later Kenya), which had been established in that same year. Thuku was born to Wanjiku (d. 1934), the third wife of Kairianja (d. 1899), a Kikuyu elder and scion of Gathirimu, a powerful nineteenth-century clan head and land owner. Like most Kikuyu boys, Thuku spent most of his childhood tending to his family’s goat herd. At the age of twelve, the entrepreneurial Thuku found work with the Gospel Missionary Society, an American organization that had been established in Kambui five years earlier in 1902. He then enrolled in the society’s school, where he was a pupil from 1907 to 1911 under the care of W. P. Knapp and Dr. J. E. Henderson, a strong opponent of settler encroachment on African land. With a working knowledge of both English and Swahili, he moved to the bustling new city of Nairobi in 1911 and got his first job as a bank messenger. He was soon dismissed, however, after he was convicted of forging a check. After spending two years in prison for the crime, he found a job as a compositor for the settler newspaper, *The Leader*, and in 1918 he took up a post as a telephone exchange clerk in the Treasury.

Thuku’s political career began in the postwar period at a time when white settler influence on colonial policy had reached its apogee. His educational and occupational background, combined with his ingenuity, positioned him uniquely to articulate the grievances of the urban African community. In June 1921, Thuku and others in the Pangani neighborhood of Nairobi began organizing politically, the culmination of which was the formation of the East African Association (EAA)