

Life and legacy of Elijah Barayi

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Introduction

The aim of this report is to give insight into the life of Elijah Barayi. He was an iconic South African hero in the fight for justice, equality, and democracy. He devoted his life to promoting worker rights and bringing about the end of apartheid in South Africa. His rise from a humble background to becoming a prominent leader in the labour movement and the anti-apartheid activism, his role in shaping South Africa's history and his enduring impact on the fight for social justice is an uplifting story that exemplifies the resilience of human spirit.

Elijah Barayi (1944 – 1994) served as a prominent South Africa trade unionist and anti-apartheid activist. He was a part of the formation of National Union of Mineworkers in 1982 and a part of the struggle since the early 1950s. Elijah knew the former president of South Africa, Mr. Nelson Mandela and was involved in the Youth League, which he believed shaped his political awareness (Van Niekerk, 1986).

According to Van der Walt (2009) Barayi worked as a government clerk, and joined the Youth League following a racial clash with white youths. He was active in the 1950s civil disobedience campaigns of the Congress Alliance, comprising the ANC, the Colored Peoples Congress, the (White) Congress of Democrats, the Indian National Congress, and, from 1955, the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU).

The next sections will discuss in detail his early life, his life as an activist, the memorial training centre and finally his retirement and death

Early Life of Barayi

Elijah Barayi was born into a world marked by racial oppression, economic exploitation, and systemic injustice. He was born on 15 June 1930 in Lingelihle (Cradock) in the Eastern Cape to working-class parents. At eighteen years, Barayi joined the African National Congress (ANC) Youth League in 1948, at the time when he was about to complete his Junior Certificate qualification. In 1949 he completed his matric qualification at Healtown Institution. Unable to afford his schooling at Fort Hare University, he accepted a job in Cradock as a clerk for the Department of Native Affairs (Median Don, 2024).

He later resigned to take up employment as clerk at State Mines in Brakpan while also serving as an organising secretary for the ANC (Kgalema Motlanthe Foundation, 2019).

He was married to Nontobeko and had four children.

Life as an Activist

Growing up in apartheid-era South Africa, Barayi experienced first-hand the hardships faced by a lot black communities. His journey into activism began when he joined the ANC Youth League, after he and Zinzele Ngalo had experienced a racial attack. Although Barayi's early life was marked by hardship, it instilled in him a deep sense of solidarity with his fellow oppressed compatriots.

Elijah Barayi started participating actively in ANC Youth League events, and his pivotal involvement in the 1952 defiance campaign which led to his arrest and one-month detention in Cradock. In the same year he joined the ANC, under the mentorship of the Rev Calata, a former ANC secretary general.

Elijah Barayi worked briefly for the Department of Native Affairs but resigned as he felt it was in the leading role of administering apartheid. He held a variety of jobs until 1960 when he left the Eastern Cape to take up employment as a clerk at State Mines, Brakpan. At that stage, he was an organising secretary for the ANC and was detained during 1960's state of emergency declared in the aftermath of the Sharpeville massacre of March 21, 1960 and held for six months (South African History Online, 2019).

In May 1973, Elijah moved to Carletonville. In 1976 he became a personnel assistant on the mine. Elijah experienced first-hand the conditions that miners experienced underground. He was elected as the liaison committee. Following the report of the Wiehahn Commission in 1979, he became active in establishing the trade union movement on the mines.

In 1981, Elijah met the current President Cyril Ramaphosa, and this inspired him to become a founding member of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). When the NUM was formed in 1982, he was the Vice-president of the organisation. In May 1985 he led nine thousand miners at Blyvooruitzicht on strike in protest against the dismissal of two shaft stewards. NUM affiliated to the new Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), and In December 1985 at the launch of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), Barayi was elected president of the new organisation, a position he held until 1991 (Jeremy,1991; South African History Online, 2019).

Barayi played a key role in the formation of COSATU in 1985 (South African History Online, 2019.). During his time in COSATU, Elijah Barayi accomplished several significant achievements. While serving as the first president of COSATU, he provided strong leadership to the organization during a critical period in South Africa's history (South African History Online, 2019). Under his leadership, Elijah Barayi and COSATU were staunch opponents of apartheid, organizing strikes, protests, and other actions to challenge the apartheid regime and advocate for the rights of workers (South African History Online, 2019; COSATU, n.d).

Additionally, he helped build international solidarity with the anti-apartheid movement, forming alliances with labour unions and organizations around the world to support the struggle against apartheid (South African History Online, 2019). Elijah Barayi and COSATU campaigned for improved working conditions, higher wages, and better benefits for South African workers, while also fighting against discriminatory labour practices and advocating for the rights of marginalized workers, including black South Africans and women (South African History Online, 2019; African National Congress, n.d).

In 1986 when the nationwide state of emergency was declared, he was detained for two weeks then restricted to the Carletonville magistrate district (South African History Online, 2019).

Retirement and Death

Elijah Barayi retired from COSATU in 1991 and 1993 from mine work. He passed away in January 1994 after a short illness.

Elijah Barayi Memorial Training Centre

Elijah Barayi Memorial Training Centre is the NUM's training division, aimed at union officials and members. The Centre is a non-profit organisation and operates as a vehicle for training and development of shop stewardship and leadership. The Training Centre contributes in the stabilization of labour relations in the industries where NUM organizes by providing training to union officials from throughout organized labour. Over 500 trainees a year receive instruction and training in computer literacy, basic economics, and leadership training from the Training Centre, in collaboration with reputable educational institutions (Rubushe, 2009).

Conclusion

Elijah Barayi's life was a testament to the power of resilience, courage, and unwavering commitment to the pursuit of justice. From his humble beginnings in rural South Africa to his leadership role in the labour movement and the anti-apartheid struggle, Barayi dedicated himself wholeheartedly to the cause of freedom and equality. His legacy continues to inspire and motivate those who strive to build a more just and equitable world, reminding us that the struggle for justice is an ongoing journey that requires dedication, sacrifice, and unwavering resolve. Elijah Barayi may have left this world, but his spirit lives on in the hearts of all who believe in the possibility of a better future for humanity.

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