

Strikes Have Followed Me All My Life. A South African Autobiography, Emma Mashinini, Women's Press, London, 1989 (142pp, no price given, ISBN 07043 4177 8).

This publication highlights the writer's experience as a detained Trade Unionist in South African prisons. As the first black woman Trade Union leader Mashinini showed great courage in the defiance of the apartheid regime.

Part One of the book discusses the writer's early life, before her detention. Part Two discusses her detention and life after detention. Part One Chapter One highlights the writer's upbringing. It depicts the typical life of black married women who are housewives and factory workers, who face dehumanisation and all forms of insults and abuse at the work place. These women are frustrated at home and at work, and this is clearly shown in the writer's life story. She became conscious of the political situation in South Africa while still a child.

In Chapter Four the writer describes the birth of the Trade Union, CCAWUSA, which became one of the most powerful unions in South Africa, and of which she was secretary. Mashinini tells how CCAWUSA was able to control the strikes and boycotts, even those organised outside the union. As a result of tremendous support from the black workers CCAWUSA became a force to be reckoned with. The authorities became concerned about the tremendous influence and power the movement had over black workers. In Chapter Six Mashinini describes her detention under Sections 6 and 22 of the General Laws Amendment Act. This nationwide clampdown on trade unions and political activity was obviously a show of strength by the apartheid regime.

Chapter Seven depicts the author's deep emotions as she describes the inhuman treatment she received at Pretoria Central Prison, a frightening prison known for the detention of condemned prisoners, ready to be hanged. It was at Pretoria Central Prison that she almost broke down because of solitary confinement, and interrogation - a nerve breaking exercise which left her with hypertension and amnesia. In Chapter Eight Mashinini describes how she forgot the name of her youngest daughter (Dudu) because of the psychological trauma caused by continuous detention.

Part Two Chapter Ten describes the freedom felt when the author and other detainees were released. This chapter confirms the results of the inhuman treatment received by the detainees, as another detainee and colleague was so disoriented that she could not remember her home address in Soweto. The author's psychological trauma was illustrated by a fear of cars and gates, which she associated with the police coming to take her away, and so she felt like running away. As a result of memory lapses and these fears she was sent to Geneva for medical and rehabilitation services. It was in Geneva that she began to write this book.

The author's approach and presentation is commendable, though some of the language used as the author's tolerance reached its limit is not palatable. Some of the language is abusive, but the reader can understand under what circumstances they were used. The book is easy to read and is free from academic jargon.

The author displayed great endurance and courage during her detention, a good lesson for political activists. The authorities could not break her, although psychologically she was not the same person after detention.

Reviewed by T G Nduna, MSW student, School of Social Work, Harare, Zimbabwe.