

Norman Stewart Middleton (1921–2015)

NORMAN Middleton, a World War II veteran, trade unionist, anti-apartheid activist, sports administrator and politician, died on 2 July 2015 at the age of 94.

To many, Middleton's politics seemed paradoxical. The various caps that he wore and roles that he played did not fit comfortably with each other. His son Winston, described his father's politics as pragmatic, as a means to an end, the end being the achievement of non-racialism in South Africa.

From the various tributes paid at his funeral, Middleton remains the unsung hero who fought tirelessly for non-racialism in sport. It is ironic, that more than 20 years into its new democracy, racialism in sport is still an issue in South Africa. The struggle that Middleton waged in this regard has gone unrecognised by the ANC-led government.

In non-racial sport Middleton rose up the ranks, becoming the President of the South African Soccer Federation (SASF) and President of the South African Council of Sport (SACOS). Both organisations campaigned for the isolation of apartheid sport internationally and argued that there could not be normal sport in an abnormal society. In 1974, he was invited to address the world football body, FIFA. This was after SASF had made representations to FIFA to expel the all-white Football Association of South Africa (FASA). In an episode labelled by the press as "Passport Blackmail," he was informed by the South African Government that he would be given a passport if he declared in writing that he would not do anything to prevent South African Sportsmen



Norman Middleton

and women from participating in international sport. Middleton's response was uncompromising. He said at the time, "I will not be blackmailed into being granted a passport because I am fighting for non-racial sport and a free and democratic South Africa."

Two years later in 1976, he was again invited by FIFA to attend its Congress in Montreal, Canada. Once more the apartheid government set conditions on granting his passport. Middleton refused to play ball and said, "I want all South African sportsmen and women to enjoy international sport and not only the white sportsmen and women. I would not defend a system where South African sportsmen and women of colour are discriminated against at all levels of society. If I ever visit overseas countries I would tell them nothing but the truth as it exists in South Africa instead of false propaganda that is being promoted overseas in regards to the sports policy of the country. If telling the truth is

going to jeopardise the position of white sportsmen and women, then I believe this should be done – the sooner the better.”

Middleton later resigned from SACOS after members expressed unhappiness over his membership of the Coloured Representative Council (CRC). He ended up being pushed out of the soccer federation, SASF. Despite this difference of opinion, he remained a highly respected sports administrator and fighter for non-racial sport. Evidence of this was clear by the large turnout out of former members of SACOS and SASF at his funeral. In an interview with *The Witness* in 2011, when he turned 90, he said his political stance was never one of total co-operation with the state but to fight the system from within to bring about its demise.

It was the friendships he formed in the army with some of his fellow soldiers that led him to becoming one of the founding members of the Coloured Labour Party, which was formed in 1950. As a member of the party he participated in the CRC and at municipal level he was a member of the Coloured Local Affairs Committee (CLAC) on the Pietermaritzburg City Council. However, Middleton stopped short of endorsing the Party’s position to participate in the Government’s Tricameral Parliamentary System. This was a system introduced by the apartheid government in the 1980s to co-opt Coloureds and Indians into Parliament while leaving out Blacks. At the Labour Party Congress held in Eshowe in January 1983, Middleton and his long-time friend, Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi, who was a guest speaker, made impassioned pleas to the party membership not to participate in the

Tricameral System. Middleton saw this as co-option that would comprise the position he stood for to fight the system from within. After lengthy speeches, the pro-participation faction led by the Reverend Allan Hendrickse won the day and Middleton resigned from the party.

His friendship with Buthelezi endured and he became a firm supporter of the Inkatha Freedom Party, which saw him serve as a Member of Parliament for the Party for 10 years after 1994. At his funeral, Buthelezi spoke of their long association and friendship. He said that early on in their relationship they had discovered that they were related to each other as their mother’s had been cousins.

It was his close ties with Inkatha that led to controversy in his role as a trade unionist. Middleton cut his teeth in the trade union movement in the Leather Workers Union. In the 1960s he was one of the leaders of a massive leather workers’ strike, an event that brought Pietermaritzburg to a standstill.

Middleton remained active in trade union circles. In the 1970s he was the Natal Organiser of the Engineering Industrial Union, which was an affiliate of the Trade Union Council of South Africa (TUCSA). According to South African History Online, his attempts to help organise Black workers at the request of a prominent trade union leader at the time, Barney Dladla, led to his dismissal from the Engineering Union. This was because he had allowed a Black trade union to temporarily use his union’s office space in Pietermaritzburg.

Middleton went on to have a brief association with the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU), the predecessor to Cosatu. It was an association that did not end well. Jeremy

Baskin in his book, *Striking Back: A History of Cosatu* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1991): wrote: “In 1981 a clash occurred within Fosatu’s SFAWU [Sweet, Food and Allied Workers Union] following an attempt by Inkatha supporters (Willie Manthe and Norman Middleton) to take control of the union. The issue threatened to split Fosatu in the Natal region ... Manthe and Middleton then formed a breakaway union.” (p 65)

Former Cosatu Secretary-General, Jay Naidoo, said that their position in consolidating the trade union movement was to stick to factory floor issues and steer clear of political affiliation. He told Baskin that Middleton and Manthe had conspired with Inkatha in a plot to hijack the union’s Natal branch as part of Buthelezi’s attempts to appropriate the province’s labour movement. Naidoo went on a month’s leave in December 1981 and returned to find that SFAWU was linked to Inkatha’s headquarters in Ulundi. Naidoo, quoted in Baskin’s book, recalls feeling the need to act swiftly: “We had to take a stand on this issue. And this was very important, because just as much as FOSATU didn’t want any links with the popular Congress movement (the national democratic revolution), they also didn’t want Inkatha, though Inkatha was very popular among the workers. So the leadership fired Willie Mante, and refused to accept the employment of Norman Middleton.”

In his interview with *The Witness* in 2011, Middleton said he still had the letter from Alec Erwin who was secretary-general of the organisation at the time. He described the letter as dismissing him from his job because he continued to maintain a political profile. Middleton and Manthe went on to form

the Natal Council of Trade Unions, under the banner of Inkatha.

Like his politics, Middleton’s life story represents a fascinating slice of South Africa history. He was born in Sophiatown, Johannesburg and moved to Pietermaritzburg when he was 10 years old. His father, William Charles Middleton, was a Scot from Aberdeen. His mother Dorothy Mzimela, grew up in Greytown, trained as a teacher and taught in Johannesburg. Middleton’s parents married legally the year they came to Pietermaritzburg. In his 2011 *Witness* interview, Middleton said that his father was a stonemason and they had moved to Natal because of the masonry work available in the province. He said his father had been involved in the re-building of the Pietermaritzburg City Hall which had been destroyed by fire as well as the rockery at Alexandra Park. He was told that his father’s name was written somewhere on the stonework at the entrance of the park, near the swimming pool. Middleton’s mother got a teaching job in Greytown and only came home at weekends, so he was sent to St Francis College, a boarding school run by the Brothers at the Marianhill Monastery. At the time the school was allowed to accept Black, Indian and Coloured students. He went on to finish his schooling at Ohlange, a private school in Durban run by ANC founding member, John Dube. While he was there, he lived with the Dube family.

He described his becoming a World War II soldier as due to a chance encounter. He and two friends went to the Grand Cinema in Pietermaritzburg, which allowed 10 seats to be reserved for “non-whites”. They arrived late and all the seats were taken. “We were sitting on the kerb near the City Hall

deciding what to do next, when we saw these soldiers recruiting for the army. We asked them what it cost to join. They said nothing and told us, you'll get paid. We thought we were signing up for jobs and did not even bother to tell our parents. Two weeks later the army arrived to pick me up at my house.

"I was taken to the station where I met my friends and we were issued with uniforms and put on a train heading for Kimberley. When we tried to protest as we hadn't told our parents, the army said it would inform our families. I only understood how upset our parents were when I got a stinking letter from my father who was furious over my actions." (The *Witness* interview 21/01/2011.)

Middleton's war experience laid the foundation for his activism and his commitment to fight for non-racialism. He recalled that being in the South African army was the first time he came face to face with racism. He said tasks, rations and privileges received were clearly delineated according to race. At the same time he saw that blacks were fully integrated in the armies of other countries. After getting lost in a sandstorm while stationed in Egypt, he was captured and taken into a prisoner-of-war camp in Egypt.

Landing in Durban after the war, he received his discharge papers and along with the other Black soldiers, he was issued his bicycle and big brown army coat. Years later in the

late 1970s Middleton gave the coat to Pietermaritzburg Black Consciousness leader, the late Henry Isaacs when he helped him escape into exile via Lesotho. Isaacs fled the country shortly after the death of his close friend, Steve Biko.

Middleton's mother died in 1939 and his father went on to live to the age of 92. He had an elder sister who married a White man during the war and left South Africa to live overseas. Middleton's late wife Natalie, was a highly-respected Matron at Pietermaritzburg's Edendale Hospital. They had four children.

In his 2011 *Witness* interview, at the age of 90, Middleton said that he looked back at his life with no regrets for the choices he had made. He said then that he was not happy with the materialism that exists in the world and the loss of volunteerism. He was critical of sports administrators who earned fat pay cheques. Speaking in 2010, when South Africa hosted the Football World Cup, Middleton said: "In the past non-racial sport was successfully organised by unpaid volunteers with minimal resources. Often times we had to dig into our own pockets. Today much money is allocated to sporting codes and to so many paid officials, yet we still witness a lack of sport development from junior level upwards while there are contestations and court battles about the election of officials." (The *Witness*, 19/06/2010.)

NALINI NAIDOO