

20 November 2003

Mr. Serake Mfolwe – The Teacher Activist

The first time I knew of Mr. Serake Mfolwe was when he wrote to all Secondary School teachers calling them for a meeting at Sedibelo Motel in Mochudi. The meeting was called to discuss the formation of a teacher organization that would fully articulate the concerns of teachers especially those at secondary level. Teachers in general and secondary school teachers in particular were unhappy with the representation by the Botswana Teachers Union which was viewed as a government mouth piece. BTU was then the only teacher organization and its leadership was dominated by school heads, something that the teachers did not take kindly to.

The meeting did take place on the 16th April 1986. The meeting which was chaired by Mr. Fernando Maoto, took a resolution to form an organization called Botswana Federation of Secondary School Teachers (BOFESETE). An interim committee was set up chaired by Mr. Serake Mfolwe. The following year BOFESETE was registered with the Registrar of Societies thanks to the vision and perseverance of Mr. Mfolwe. Some of the early leaders of BOFESETE who worked hand in hand with Mr. Mfolwe were Gaogakwe Phorano, Lesedi Seitei, Baboloki Tlale (current president of BOFESETE) Slumber Walebowa, Titus Mbuya and Odirile Gabasiane.

The next time I met Mr. Mfolwe was in December, of the same year when we (secondary school teachers) were engaged in the Junior Certificate marking. The venue was the Botswana Polytechnic as it was called then. The marking conditions were typical: we were housed within shared students' hostels, squeaking beds, broken windows, leaking ceilings, broken doors and smelling ablutions. Each block housed over thirty teachers who shared the few showers and toilets most of which were not working properly. At the dining hall, conditions were no better. We were overcrowded and the food was substandard. The conditions were generally deplorable.

It was against this background that Serake Mfolwe came to the fore. Teachers came together to discuss their conditions and he used the forum to call on teachers to wake up and fight for their rights. He talked at length about teacher's apathy and the need to reject the conditions under which the teachers worked. He implored teachers to break their silence and struggle against injustices perpetrated by an insensitive Ministry of Education. This was a time when it was unheard of for teachers to publicly speak up against the authorities in their presence. Serake did not mince his words when he declared the deplorable state of the marking venue and the meagre allowances we were given for

marking. But more importantly he called teachers to speak up in the Setswana spirit of “ngwana yoo sa le leng o swela tharing”.

His speech was an inspiration to all who attended and some of us resolved to heed his call and continue to struggle for improved working conditions and upliftment of the status of the teachers as espoused in Education for Kagisano. No doubt, the following year in the light of unchanged conditions we stood up as teachers and refused to work under poor marking conditions and meagre marking fees.

A few years down the line Mr. Mfolwe was promoted but unlike most of his peers, his entering management did not stop him from continuing to champion the cause of teachers' rights. He continued as a tower of strength within BOFESETE and the teaching fraternity as a whole. Even when he was no longer in the executive he continued to be an active member and advisor to BOFESETE. I still remember in the mid 1990's when BOFESETE was almost dead due to gross intimidation by government and increased apathy of teachers that he was always there for us. He would for instance use his personal money to assist, I and Mr. Tlale as we visited teachers around the country to rejuvenate the dead structures. How many of us can sacrifice their hard earned money for a dying organization?

When most school heads chickened out and feared to be associated with BOFESETE, Mfolwe was one of the few who continued to play an active role in its activities until his last days. He attended almost all of its conferences and congresses and made fatherly and meaningful contributions. He never let us down. One thing that is most admired about Mr. Mfolwe was his straight forward manner. He did not pretend and said the truth even if it hurt. I remember at the Mochudi congress in August 2002, when he boldly stood up before the young developers and candidly told them that when BOFESETE was formed it wanted to unite teachers and that in order to achieve that goal there was need to do away with organizations which stood in its way. This idea of teacher unity is still an agenda item for BOFESETE though the tactics are not exactly the same.

During last years teachers industrial action Mr. Mfolwe was the only school head who bravely wrote to us when he realized we were about to lose control of the teachers as the leadership. Below are excerpts from his letter to BOFESETE;

“The teachers are to a greater sense abusing the boycott as they tend to engage in activities that have never been identified with cause”

“The teachers disrespect for ethical considerations has greatly worsened. This in itself erodes the considered image of the profession and progress so far gained”

These words show that he was a man who believed in true professionalism. He did not want the good work that BOFESETE is doing to be tainted by disrespect for authority and wayward behaviour. His spirit will continue to improve those of us who have worked closely with him. BOFESETE send its condolences to his family, friends and colleagues. BOFESETE, the teaching fraternity and the nation at large has lost a gallant fighter for freedom, justice and democracy. **May his soul rest in peace.**

BOFESETE National Executive Committee