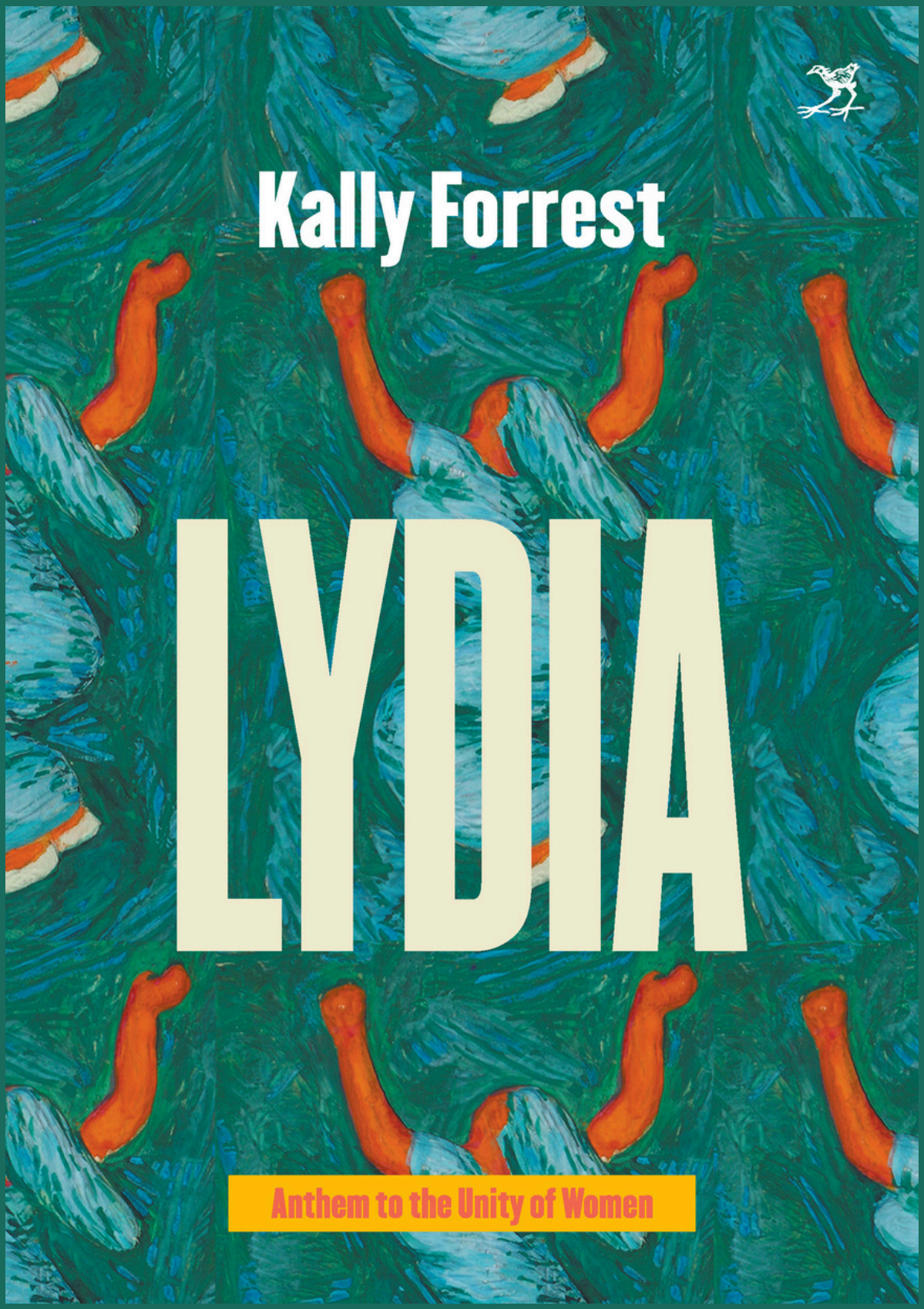
Book Extract



Joint winner of the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences (NHISS) 2025 award for Biography: Non Fiction

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Extract from

Lydia: Anthem to the Unity of Women

By Kally Forrest

Jacana Media 2024, R300 pp.59-61 (also available on Kindle, for US$20).

Dr Kally Forrest, the author of *Metal that Will not Bend* – a history of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) – is a former trade unionist and editor of the South African Labour Bulletin. Now she has written a remarkable biography *Lydia: Anthem to the Unity of Women.*

With great care and meticulous research, she brings us the life of Lydia Komape, also known as Mam Lydia Kompe. Kally travels in Lydia's footsteps, with family, friends, comrades and ancestors from Limpopo and Johannesburg to Cape Town where Lydia sat in Nelson Mandela's Parliament. Mam Lydia became secretary of the Transvaal branch of the new Transport and General Workers' Union (T&G) in 1978. This book tells a story from those early years, as trade unions organised in defiance of employers and apartheid oppression.

Chapter Five

Women have shown bravery

Lydia stands in amazement. It's seven in the morning and she has just arrived at the union offices. They are full of women. She looks at them and they stare back at her very quietly, nervously. She recognises them immediately: a large group of Anglo American Property Services (Ampros) night shift cleaners, who are usually friendly, loud and talkative. She comes straight to the point. "Good morning, everyone. Why are you here?"

Elizabeth draws nearer. "Mama Lydia, Mam Lydia, we've all been dismissed. Everyone you see here has been fired." She stops, giving no further explanation.

"Fired! But I saw you yesterday. Nothing was wrong. Whatever's happened?

Elizabeth struggles for a while, trying to find some way of expressing herself. But there is really only one way of saying it: "We all stole a lot of toilet rolls."

Lydia's heart sinks. She sees the whole wall of toilet rolls in front of her in the storeroom in the building where they work. The cleaners have keys and easy access.

"We were sharing them out when the supervisor arrived earlier than we expected. We were caught. He dismissed us at once. We've been waiting for hours to come and talk to you. What are we going to do? We just can't lose our jobs. We can't. What'll out children do?"

Lydia leans against a wobbly desk. She feels upset. She sees the hard work, the fight that they have all engaged in over the months, suddenly disappear They are on the verge of signing an all-important house agreement which will allow them to negotiate changes at work. The women work eight hours in the dead of night, every night, cleaning up after the office workers have left at the end of the day. In this time they have no time to rest, and nothing to warm their cold food, which they have cooked in the afternoon at home. No hot water, tea, coffee or milk. No chairs or table to eat at. No changing rooms. At the end of their shift in the early hours of the morning, they lie down on flattened cardboard bones on the concrete floor and try to sleep for a few hours before they leave for home.

The bosses don't want to recognise the union. They're resisting it. But Lydia feels she has been making some headway recently, especially as the union threatened to go to the press and expose the women's conditions. The liberal Ampros would do anything to avoid this kind of exposure. And now this a perfect excuse for the company to bow out. The women are unskilled. They'll be replaced in a day.

She trudges out of the office and walks across town to face the manager, Mr. Osrin. He pretends to like her, but she knows he resents her and her needling complaints irritate him. She also pretends to respect him, but back in the office, in her usual joking way, she mimics his way of talking.

She enters his office full of contrition and humility. "Today don't call me Mrs Kompe. I'm your doormat today. You can come and have me clean your shoes. I'm prepared to get down on my knees. I'm pleading for your compassion and mercy. We've gone so far with negotiations we don't want to ruin anything." She sees he's angry, but her entreaties are slowly softening him and he's listening to her. He finally capitulates and agrees to give the women a last chance. She bursts out crying. She wants to hug him, but she knows you can't hug a manager, so she just gasps, "I can't believe you." He concedes that they're good workers, that he knows them, and he doesn't want to train up a whole new batch.

Lydia runs most of the way back to the office. When she gets there, she's in such an emotional state that she begins weeping when she sees the women Seeing her tears, they look back in shock, certain their dismissals have been confirmed. "I'm crying because I'm overwhelmed. He says you must go back tonight and do night shift." The noise is thunderous. They all start singing and the whole office joins them in ululation and excitement. "We'll go back now. We'll work now." Lydia chuckles and tells them to go home, have a wash, rest and return ready for work.[1]

This episode marked the beginning. Soon after, the union and the employers made an appointment for a meeting. The shock and desperation of the workers and the union's arguments and commitment had broken the barrier. Over the coming months the union negotiated the provision of two overalls and soap for washing for each woman, a changing room with showers, and a restroom with tables and chairs and a small stove for heating food and boiling water. The company also granted the cleaners permission to sleep until dawn in the changing room on newly laid carpets.[2]

Already in 1982 security guards had approached T&G to organise them at Ampros. The company was expanding and buying and developing shopping centres and offices in Benoni, Pretoria, Killarney, Sandton and Johannesburg's CBD. Part of its rental service was the direct provision of its own security and cleaning staff. Soon the women cleaners also approached the union. The latter was keen to organise women as a counterbalance to it mainly male members in municipalities and in trucking and bus companies where it had already won or was busy negotiating recognition agreements.[3]

The cleaners regarded Lydia as their saviour not only after she had helped them retain their jobs when threatened with dismissal but also for the huge improvements she had helped secure in their wages and working conditions. She enjoyed their appreciation, but she also knew, both from her rural upbringing and her work in the union, that no one person was responsible for making things change. The more people united, the greater the power to change things.

ENDNOTES

[1] Narrative and quotes based on interview with Lydia Komape, 16.11.2021.
[2] Russell, D. 1989. *Lives of Courage: Women for a New South Africa*. New York: Basic Books.
[3] Interview with Jane Barrett: former General Secretary T&G interviewed 5.5.2021.

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