



**Joint Press Statement from NUMSA and the South African Guild of Actors (SAGA):
*Mam' Nandi Nyembe's death must translate into genuine transformation for the creative industry***

**7 September 2025
Press statement**

The National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) and the South African Guild of Actors (SAGA) mourn the passing of veteran actress Mam' Nandi Nyembe. Her face and voice were woven into the fabric of South African life bringing joy, laughter, and meaning to millions over decades. She was a beloved icon whose creative brilliance enriched our screens and our souls.

We extend our deepest condolences to her family, friends, and the broader creative community. Her death is not just a personal loss for her family, it is a painful blow to an industry already in crisis. She was buried last weekend.

Recently, NUMSA joined SAGA and international actor unions, SAG-AFTRA from the U.S. and ACTRA from Canada, in a conference to confront the harsh realities facing workers in the creative sector. We heard devastating accounts of abuse and exploitation in a space that remains dangerously unregulated. SAGA expressed a strong commitment to working with organised labour to push for regulation and basic protections for creative workers.

Mam' Nyembe's final months were marked by financial hardship. Despite her fame and decades of contribution, she struggled to afford medical care and died without the dignity she deserved. Her story is tragically common. Many South African creatives live in poverty, even as their work fuels a billion-rand industry.

This is not a coincidence, it is a system. The creative sector is parasitic, feeding off the labour of artists while denying them fair compensation and security. Mam' Nyembe's suffering was not accidental. It was engineered by an industry that treats its workers as disposable. Jack Devnarain, Chairperson of SAGA, said:

"For fifteen years, SAGA has lobbied government for labour protections and fair regulation. Until freelance actors are recognised as workers under labour law, we will continue to see heartbreaking stories of celebrated performers dying in poverty. Mam' Nyembe's passing is a brutal reminder of the cost of inaction. We've waited 30 years—how much longer must we wait while politicians prepare their next eulogy for another actor who dies destitute? This is not neglect. It is a deliberate strategy to deny creatives their constitutional rights."

NUMSA and SAGA believe that the abandonment of creative workers is a betrayal of South Africa's democratic promise. It is the opposite of transformation.

NUMSA's Deputy General Secretary Mbuso Ngubane added:

"Cultural workers were central to the fight against apartheid. Protest theatre and music were tools of resistance, used to educate, mobilize, and unify communities. Icons like Bra Hugh Masekela and Miriam Makeba used their art to challenge oppression. Yet today, the very



sector that helped liberate this country is left to rot. As a militant red union, NUMSA cannot stand by while workers in the creative industry suffer exploitation in post-apartheid South Africa.”

The creative sector spans music, film, television, performing arts, digital media, crafts, and design. It contributes 6.72% to the economy and employs over a million people, according to the South African Cultural Observatory. Yet most workers are freelancers with no standard contracts, no benefits, and no legal protections. Since 1994, the labour movement has fought for rights across sectors, from mining to domestic work. But creatives remain excluded. Actors, writers, directors, and crew have no recognition under labour law. This must change.

Key challenges include:

- Aggressive resistance from industry owners to regulation and transformation, many of whom are remnants of apartheid-era media.
- Contracts that strip workers of rights, despite the Labour Relations Act.
- Blacklisting of those who speak out against exploitation.
- Fragmented workplaces that make union organising difficult.

The conference resolved that only workers can drive change. The Department of Employment and Labour will be a key partner in this effort. Transformation will require militant organising and collective action.

Mam' Nyembe's death must mark a turning point. She must be the last to suffer such indignity. We call on all creative workers to unite, mobilize, and fight for their rights. The industry must be transformed, not in name, but in substance.

Ends.

For media inquiries:

Jack Devnarain

Chairperson SAGA

☎ 082 467 8925

✉ chairman@saguildofactors.co.za

📱 [Facebook](#)

🐦 Twitter: @SAGActors

Phakamile Hlubi-Majola

NUMSA National Spokesperson

☎ 083 376 7725

✉ phakamileh@numsa.org.za

NUMSA Contact Details:

☎ 011 689 1700

📱 [Facebook](#)

🐦 Twitter: @Numsa_Media