Moses Mauane Kotane was born on 9 August 1905 at Tamposstad in the Rustenburg district of the then Western Transvaal, now called North West.

Kotane, who came from a devoutly Christian peasant family, grew up as a herd boy and only went to school for the first time at the age of 15. He learned to read and write for only two years before he went to work for a farmer. His love for books was ignited and he became a voracious reader who used his spare time to read as many books as possible.

When he turned 17 in 1922, he quit his farm job and went to Krugersdorp, where he held various jobs, including being a photographer’s assistant, domestic servant, miner and bakery worker.

In 1928 he joined the African National Congress (ANC) and later that year he joined the African Bakers Union, an affiliate of the new Federation of Non-European Trade Unions (FNETU). The trade union federation was then being strengthened by the then Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA), now called the South African Communist Party. In 1929 Kotane joined the CPSA and soon became both the vice-chairperson of the FNETU and a member of the party’s politburo.

He enrolled in the communist-run night school in Ferreirastown, Johannesburg, where he became known for his ability to master the most abstruse political writings.

Kotane was recognised as a disciplined, focused and hardworking cadre.

In 1931 he became a full-time party functionary. He also contributed to Umsebenzi (The Worker), the CPSA’s newspaper.

As one of the CPSA’s most intellectually astute African recruits, Kotane was selected to study Marxism-Leninism at the International Lenin School in Moscow in the Soviet Union. This was in a period when the party was promoting the goal of a “Native Republic” that espoused that African workers should own and control the means of production in a free and democratic society.

In 1939, Kotane became General-Secretary of the CPSA, a post he continued to hold through the CPSA’s subsequent phases of legality, illegality and exile.

Significantly, Kotane fused his Marxist convictions with Pan-Africanism that emphasised indigenous African leadership in the struggle for a just and equal society. He straddled the membership of the Communist Party and ANC, giving both organisations his commitment and loyalty. But it was in the latter organisation that he was held in high esteem for his principled stance and vision as a pragmatic leader who translated theory into practice.

In 1946 he was elected to the ANC National Executive Committee (NEC), a position he held until he was banned by the apartheid regime. But Kotane was defiant and refused to obey unjust laws.

It was in 1946, following the 1946 mine strike that he was subjected with other leaders of the Communist Party to two years of futile legal proceedings. It was the Jan Smuts government that introduced the idea of the “Red Menace” and wished to demonstrate its determination to deal with the much-feared communists. But the government, just like in the Treason Trial, failed to make its case.

The Communist Party was banned in 1950. This saw Kotane move from the party’s headquarters in Cape Town back to Johannesburg. He opened a furniture business in Alexandra Township.

Kotane was one of the first to be banned under the Suppression of Communism Act of 1950. But he ignored his banning order to speak in support of the Defiance Campaign in June 1952. He was arrested with one of the first group of defiers. To many, he was an exemplary leader who did not hesitate to thrust himself forward as an example of militancy.

In December 1952 he was tried with other leaders of the Defiance Campaign and given a nine month suspended sentence.

In 1955 he attended the Bandung Conference of Asian-African leaders as an observer.

In December 1956 he was charged with treason and remained a defendant in the Treason Trial until charges against him were dropped in November 1958.

During the 1960 state of emergency he was detained for four months and in late 1962 he was placed under 24-hour house arrest.

In early 1963 he left South Africa for Tanzania, where he became the Treasurer-General of the ANC in exile.

Following elections held in Tanzania in April 1969, he was returned to the NEC.

Kotane suffered a stroke in 1968 and went to Moscow for treatment, where he remained until his death on 19 May 1978.