

Alec Erwin

Abstract:

This interview gives a brief background to Erwin's personal life including his studies at Natal University in Durban. While there he became involved with setting up the wages commission on campus which was to contribute to the strengthening of the independent trade union movement across South Africa. He describes his involvement with the Institute of Industrial Education (IIE) with Rick Turner in Durban, the setting up of Central Administration Services and later TUACC which provided the overall coordination for new independent unions MAWU, NUTW, CWIU and TGWU. He moves on to describe the formation of FOSATU in 1979 and his role in it as its first general secretary and then its first full-time education secretary. He deals briefly with the organising strategy, the role of white intellectuals, the changing of the constitution to ensure power lay in the factories, how FOSATU dealt with Inkatha and the different views on whether trade unions should play an active role in politics. The unity talks which finally led to the launching of COSATU are also touched on, its relations to the UDF, his move into NUMSA, the difference between the 'workerists' and 'populists' in COSATU and how COSATU influenced events leading up to the democratic dispensation of 1994.

Facilitator: This is an interview with Alec Erwin we are in Cape Town, the date is 30 August 2010, the interview is done by Brown Maaba. Let me just go to a specific question and then we will probably go back to other things. How did you end up at the University of Natal, I was going through some few things and I realised you were in Natal and perhaps that is where your activities began to start as a unionist?

Respondent: Well my father was born in Durban and so my mother moved there in the mid 1960s, she moved to what is now Zimbabwe, I was born in Cape Town. So when I finished my, what was then called GCE in Zimbabwe I moved out to Durban and then I worked for a year and went overseas hitchhiking. And then I started studying at Natal.

Facilitator: So both your parents came from Zimbabwe?

Respondent: no they're both South Africans but they lived there for some years. My father born in Durban my mother in Port Elizabeth.

Facilitator: At which particular time you went to Durban city, in the early 1960s?

Respondent: I started at University of Natal in 1965

Facilitator: Your impression of the place, the university in terms of politics, race and culture?

Respondent: Well the university at that time of course was pretty exclusively white, but there were some quite interesting people that started to come to the university by the time I was doing second and third year, there was a pretty active NUSAS grouping there. So a number of the NUSAS presidents we were together, Paul Pretorius, Charles Nupen, Karel Tipp and in 1972 I think it was, or thereabouts we started the wages commissions. People like Halton Cheadle, he will be someone worth talking to in Cape Town. So there was a pretty active student population and then Rick Turner, Michael Nupen and others started to reintroduce

Marxist thinking into the courses there. So we fairly quickly linked up with Marxism and started workshops and seminars with Pravin Gordhan, Yunus Mahommed, many of those people who were linked with old man Docrat and people like that who were underground then. I would say by the late 1960s early 1970s University of Natal was very active politically, and we started to forge links quite quickly with many of the comrades who came off Robben Island in early 1970s. And then the fairly big strike started 1971 and then again in 1973.

Facilitator: How were you sort of introduced into politics, you were students amongst other students, I'm sure ..(unclear) at Natal University at that time?

Respondent: I suppose I've always been relatively inclined towards politics because my father had views, he is very strongly non racial and very opposed to the apartheid era which is why he actually left South Africa to go to Zimbabwe but we moved back and forth between the two places. So I was certainly very open to political influences but I would say the main influences were lecturers, Tony Morphet would be another person worth talking to. They set up reading groups and study groups so they took us through some very rigorous historical and philosophic origins of Marx so I became politicised through those activities of mainly the lecturers at university then. And then Rick Turner had a big influence on us, we became working closely with him and the formation of the Institute for Industrial Education [IIE].

Facilitator: but were there students who were apolitical or anti-politics and so on, the general mood on campus?

Respondent: There was quite a large party of students that were pretty apolitical, I mean I've always played sports so I used to mix with apolitical ones as well but I would say, but there was a significant group of student leaders that were very political, many of whom, of my generation played very senior roles in political functions subsequently. Bobby Godsell later was there too.

Facilitator: but then you did your junior degree and your honours degree and remained at university?

Respondent: I then started as a junior lecturer in the economics department in 1970 and then in 1974 I took a year off and went to York University where I had a chance to do a great deal of reading and participate in seminars and stuff like that.

Facilitator: at that time, any connection with the ANC?

Respondent: We met in 1974, we met Joe Slovo, Ruth First a number of people, Ben Turok, many others who we met at some seminars that were organised in the UK and I met Ruth First quite a few times.

Facilitator: your impression or sense of the ANC at that time?

Respondent: We were, I think to begin with we were a little bit ultra-left, we saw them as a .(unclear) movement but in fact we worked with some really very remarkable ANC leaders, Jansen Khuzwayo, William Khanyile who was subsequently killed in Maputo, Harold Nxasana. So I would say our links with ANC comrades were very good then. Some of the union leaders that we started working with were also related to comrade Jacob

Zuma, the current president. So they had contact with him once he came out of jail when he was based in Swaziland and Mozambique. So it's through various channels had pretty close links with the ANC. But for me personally the links became much closer in the late 1970s when we started meeting the ANC in London.

Facilitator: but were there, you also had some contact in the 1970s as you said earlier with people who came from Robben Island, now the ANC in copying in exile, was there some kind of an underground cell or structures?

Respondent: There were certainly underground structures in KZN who had contact with us. I wasn't, at that time the union wasn't formally part of any of those. But certainly Jansen and William Khanyile and others were certainly reporting back and keeping contact with people in London and Lusaka and elsewhere.

Facilitator: any other form of activities at that time, underground activities?

Respondent: I guess our main work, I was lecturing at the university and working through [the IIE] industrial education. When we travelled abroad which was a few times, we would usually meet with SACTU, the trade union federation and the ANC because one thing that began to emerge is quite as quite a serious issue was the relationship to Inkatha, which was a very difficult situation. In the history for industrial education [of the IIE] Buthelezi was actually the first sort of chancellor of the Institute because we, at the time as you know, the ANC and Inkatha had made contact were working to some extent together. But for us it was also a degree of

protection because of what we perceived to be close links which I'm sure was the case between Inkatha and the state. But the activity that we were involved in was almost entirely in the building of trade unions. There were people like Raymond Suttner who was active in an underground cell and was arrested with ..(unclear) who was a lecturer there and we all knew him well. But I would say myself, Chiro [Cheadle?], Copelyn and people like (Obed?) Zuma, June-Rose Nala and Jabulani Gwala and .., we were really building the unions.

Facilitator: but when you remained at university to teach, was it your intention or you just brought in on board by some senior professors who saw some potential, what were you planning to do?

Respondent: Originally I was planning to go into some economics area but after a while it became very difficult to disentangle economics from what was happening in the struggle, so I mean I became very interested in the economic history of Africa, South Africa but in the Institute for Industrial Education, Rick Turner in particular and a number of us worked with him, I worked with him mainly on economic stuff. We developed a very good series of readers on economics and sociology and history for South Africa. So we had a distance learning course that was done and we then used that material for the trade union education. To be honest it became quite difficult to untangle what was my economics and what was happening in the struggle.

Facilitator: the two became linked somehow

Respondent: Ja

Facilitator: and also in the 1970s you had Natal University, working and also there's the rise of Black Consciousness, Steve Biko and so on. I know you were no longer a student back then but I'm sure you had a feel of the place and crowd?

Respondent: Yes

Facilitator: What was it like? Where was this going to?

Respondent: The links we mainly had was, I mean I personally, very briefly once met Biko but that was at a meeting at Allan Taylor [residence], so there were some contacts with Allan Taylor [students]. But the guys who had more contact with him were Saths Cooper and I would say that Pravin and these guys probably had more contact with those guys than the unions did. Later on, as Jay [Naidoo] recounts in his book, you had people like Jay himself moved across from essentially a BC position into the unions. In the union movement, in Durban and Maritzburg and KZN, the key people were the comrades who came off the island, who then got us back in touch with some of the older shop stewards who had been around and the previous round of unionism and so, for us the most important links were with those old union leaders who had come off the island. And then we had quite a bit of contact with Billy Nair, he was pretty good, there was a bit of tension between the [TUACC] unions and SACTU, but we always could, Billy would be a very useful bridge between all of us.

Facilitator: I know this was not your business per se, but within the black students on campus at that time, the BC group, was there no sense of other students beginning to think along non-racial lines, non-racialism?

Respondent: Look the campus was very very white, so they knew the ..., almost always I can recollect we would meet black students at Allan Taylor, and places like that. Only much later in the mid to late 1970s, then people like Moss Ngoasheng and others came off the island and started moving and doing research work at Natal and later on to people like Jay and others also built links with UWC.

Facilitator: and of course there was the formation of FOSATU but prior to that the feel about unions, how was it like, was there a need for a mother body of some sort? The state of the unions, were they fragile, were they strong or workers were afraid of joining union, what was the situation like?

Respondent: It was difficult to organise, very difficult. The first real move to ..., what happened was Harriet Bolton played an important role, she was in the garment workers union. We started benefit funds. The first thing was the benefit fund, using the administrative base of the garment workers and Harriet's union. So first operation was a thing called Central Administration Services which really began recruiting workers to a benefit fund and then from that position of being in a benefit fund, we then often would link them up with the Institute for Industrial Education and then the TUACC Union started, so there was a small sweet workers union or we try to reorganise it, Jay tells the story. We had an attempt to try to capture the Sweet Workers Industrial Union which was a registered union, we formed the Chemical Workers Industrial Union (CWIU), the National Union of Textile Workers (NUTW), the Metal and Allied Workers Union (MAWU) and the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU). Those were the four unions that formed the Trade Union Advisory and Coordinating Council (TUACC) along with the benefit fund which then serviced all those four

unions. But from 1972/73 we linked up quite quickly with the Western Province General Workers Union which was the Western Province advice office here in Cape Town and then we linked with the Johannesburg based Council of Industrial Workers of the Witwatersrand. We linked with them and then in 1972/73, through the International Metal Workers Federation, we linked with the United Automobile Workers in Port Elizabeth with people like Fred Sauls and Ned Kilders (Les Ketteldas?) and then we linked with Joe Foster here in the Western Province Motor Assembly Workers Union [WPMWU] and that .., it was that grouping, the Western Province General Workers Union didn't come into it then, moved together to form FOSATU.

Facilitator: but the challenges of forming FOSATU, talking about the Western Cape, in KZN you are talking about Inkatha this side and also there's the black/Indian factor?

Respondent: It was difficult, the hardest work was organising Indian workers because they are a minority, there were very few easily accessible white workers that we could access, but in KZN there's quite a significant Indian worker population, so particularly in the Textile Workers Union we were able to recruit quite a significant number of Indian Workers, particularly in the mill called David Whitehead, which was a big mill in Tongaat. And Jay Naidoo tells a story of other factories, like SA Fabrics, which had quite a significant Indian population which is why we persuaded him to go to try and break through to the Indian workers. But it was difficult organising Indian workers. Also with the coloured workers, we had difficulty in organising them

Facilitator: ja, in the Cape

Respondent: and then when we moved to Richards Bay then we had to be very cautious about Inkatha, we had many .., when we launched TUACC in Richards Bay, I mean in Zulu as you know, you can translate the union branch as 'i-gatsha' and that caused many problems when Gatsha was in a meeting, so we had a lot of tensions, we had to be fairly cautious. But slowly .., it was not easy, we concentrated on trying to break through in certain companies like Smith and Nephew which were English-owned companies and in some of the sugar mills. Organising was very tough, you had to be out at the gates recruiting, as the shifts changed

Facilitator: but the employers themselves, how did they perceive your actions as unionists?

Respondent: Virtually all cases there will be great hostility when you started organising, there is no case where we had an easy ride. But surely when we got enough workers in Smith and Nephew and Smith Industries and other British owned companies, we were able to get some form of recognition and access

Facilitator: the formation of UWUSA later on, did that have a relative impact on ..?

Respondent: I don't think, they were not successful in recruiting lots of members, but basically what they did was when they saw us organising fairly successfully, particularly in places like Isithebe, it's .., there they would introduce UWUSA and give us quite a hard time. The main problems we had with UWUSA were in the north, in Richards Bay and in Isithebe and

also in the sugar industry, it was quite difficult there because the employer would give UWUSA more access facilities than they would give us

Facilitator: just to spite you

Respondent: ja

Facilitator: but then you became the General Secretary of FOSATU in 1979 to 1983?

Respondent: yes

Facilitator: what was expected of you, was it easy to take the organisation off the ground?

Respondent: I'm not sure it was easy I do think that we were able, in FOSATU we were able to build very strong and good working relationships between the unions. So it was easy at the time because we formed FOSATU in 1979 and by that time you had the Wiehahn Commission and other things that had started to .., so we were making breakthroughs on the broader political front and we had by then also made much more systematic contact with ANC, mainly the ANC based in London and with SACTU and. There was .., we dealt with SACTU at two levels because formally they couldn't openly support us because their view was, their international position was that no proper unions could function in South Africa. So when we took the decision to join the ICFTU or get help from them, SACTU was quite critical but informally with top leadership they encouraged us to continue doing what we are doing but formally and publicly they were not all that supportive. In some cases where I think the

message hadn't got through like Canada and that, but that was a very complex story. There was a group of Canadians that were pretty ultra left. They accused us of being yellow unions

Facilitator: which basically meant what?

Respondent: That we were collaborating with the apartheid state by functioning as unions here, but that was .., informally

Facilitator:: Also this, there were allegations or views from other people that the unions are getting dominated by white people and so on, we need BC oriented unions and so on. How did that .?

Respondent: There was always a bit of tension, more in two places, in PE, East London, when Thozamile Botha and guys formed unions there. I wouldn't say it was straight BC but they formed on that platform and that was quite a difficult period and in Transvaal as it was then, the general workers unions and others in Sydenham formed, there was a degree of confusion for quite a while because both groups had contact with the ANC, which was true, they were closer to the ANC and ANC underground. But BC as such was less .., I would say, except for East London, Port Elizabeth, and .., a small extent in Transvaal, there were some differences. The criticism was made that there were too many white intellectuals in the unions. But I think in FOSATU what we were pretty successful at, and it was important, we changed the constitution of our unions. So unlike the conventional unions, the base of the union was located in the factory. So the shop stewards committees nominated representatives to the branch committee and from the branch committee you will nominate your regional, national .., so there was

representation done back into the factories. Which is why I think the unions spurn not very strong leaders. I mean there was a serious loss of leadership in 1993 because you had maybe a hundred or more senior shop stewards eventually going across to the ANC. That first period when you used to look at provincial governments you will see a large number of former unionists as MEC's and that

Facilitator: deployed

Respondent: but I think we were able to build pretty strong factory based structures and worker control was much stronger than the older unions had had.

Facilitator: then you became Education Secretary in 1983, was this the first Education Secretary of FOSATU or ..?

Respondent: ja, I think that we didn't, I was the first full time one. I used to be general secretary responsible for the education programme but we then decided to do much more education and push it much higher. That is when Joe [Foster] became general secretary and I became education secretary

Facilitator: I'm sure he must have realised something as the creation of this particular post as a union, that you need more education emphasis?

Respondent: ja we felt that it was important to allow for worker education and also to establish more union and class consciousness. So it was a fairly overt political agenda.

Facilitator: did that work, were the workers into that?

Respondent: I think we established, the training programmes did lead to some really capable leaders, I mean Moses Mayekiso, John Gomomo, Chris Dlamini, all these guys were very active players in the education programme. And then in the early 1980s round about 1981/82 there was a definite shifting, FOSATU's thinking, when we were involved in the unity talks for COSATU, then our view changed and we felt that only realistic political force that was going to achieve any change was the ANC. So we again intensified our education but then we did a lot more educating on the history of the ANC and what they had been doing.

Facilitator: but was everyone favourable to this idea?

Respondent: yes I would say that, we argued a little bit. There always has been in our union movement a kind of, a left tendency, of course they were not so clean, there were many of people in some of the chemical unions elsewhere who still continued against that, some education officers in NUMSA were not happy with that

Facilitator: what was their position on the issues?

Respondent: they were essentially would be, we were all at one point described as workerists, but these guys were workerists, basically they were more favourably disposed, they were anti-Communist Party and more favourably disposed towards various Trotsky-orientated groupings.

Facilitator: But also the idea that some within union structures thought you know unions should actually be involved in the union activities only and

not combine the township ANC struggles with unionism, why would they ... actually along those lines?

Respondent: there was an argument. I mean I would certainly. The argument was quite an interesting one, it was not ..., I don't think there was any major union leader who argued that unions should only stick to factory matters. The issue was more a question of, at what point will the unions be able to do something more broader? We were trying to lay the emphasis on strength in the factories so that you can have powerful organisations in the factories and not get too heavily involved in political activity that would lead to banning arrest and decimate your leadership but then in early 1980s, we had the big pension strikes which was the first time I would say that the unions struck for a demand that wasn't a wave, so we struck across it to prevent what was called the preservation of pension bill. And around that, the shop steward councils became very prominent. So in Gauteng, particularly in Germiston, Wadeville, Springs, the shop steward councils became strong and in Soweto they also became quite strong. So then Chris Dlamini and Moss Mayekiso began arguing and became important leaders in the community when the big stay away started. So I would say that for some of us, more intellectual Marxist guys, they won the day in the argument and persuaded us this was the right move to go. At that point I think it became very successful. The disagreements with UDF and that was not so much about the fact of activism, or anything like that because we didn't want to jeopardise or strengthen our organisation by taking premature or actions which would just get us smashed. But as it turned out, when the state of emergency were imposed against us, the unions survived very well because we were able to draw on our factory base strength.

Facilitator: and the formation of UDF itself, how was it perceived within union circles?

Respondent: I would say that it was generally supported and we then formed the MDM and started working with the UDF. In KZN we had to work with the UDF very closely because of the violence at the time. So we began very close. We had a joint working committee with the MDM. But to be honest the differences more lay in .., we felt that sometimes these UDF guys were just adventurous for adventurous sake you know.

Facilitator: why do you raise such an argument, will you support that?

Respondent: well they would take big stay away action without it being successful, so you would attract attention, but really, in truth the differences were very small, often the case at the time it seemed like something significant but when you look back it wasn't.

Facilitator: and the move to eventually form COSATU, what sparked that?

Respondent: what unionists should argue, good unions must always argue as you need greater and greater unity. So we started here in Langa here, some of the unity talks. There was some long unity talks that started in 1981 or early 1980s. Many unity talks, lots of meetings, arguments, arguments because you had CUSA which was linked to the UTP which at that point mine workers union was in CUSA and you had the General and Allied Workers Union who would sit with those guys, but had Food and Canning, Johan Theron was secretary of Food and Canning, along with Mandla and the others. So we always tried to build a bigger trade union federation and by that stage too we had quite a lot of contact with ANC,

and they were supportive of trying to build a bigger federation. But it was tough negotiations, trade union unity is not always so easy

Facilitator: what were the issues if there were ..(unclear) negotiations?

Respondent: There were issues about the structure of the unions, how the federation should be structured, should we have one union per industry, if you were going to do that how would you merge the unions. So I mean if you look at what became Food and Allied Workers Union, you had Sweet Food and Allied Workers Union in FOSATU and you had Food and Canning Workers Union and independent unions, and you had elements of food workers in the General and Allied Workers Union, so how you would bring about one single union out of four or five unions, within one federation was complex. There was some argument about whether we should go for general unions or industrial unions, if we were going to keep both of them together how would that work. I mean Transport and General gave rise later on to the South African Railways and Harbour Workers Union. In truth when you are merging these unions, it's not an easy task, you've got to organise the employed, you've got leaders there, you've got different factories. So it takes a lot of time from a practical point of view to pull all these things together

Facilitator: but eventually it worked of course

Respondent: ja, it was ..., people that helped it work were definitely some of the ANC comrades behind the scenes but then all the leaders like Degai (Barayi?), James Motlatsi from NUM, guys who had a lot of experience, played a very important role in pulling these things together

Facilitator: but then you guys were in contact with the ANC in exile and even internally here in the 1980s as well, what was the ANC's perception about what you ought to be doing in the fight against apartheid in the 1980s, the country was burning more or less?

Respondent: I would say we had no disagreements with ANC comrades, what the unions should be doing. I mean I think people like Mbeki, Hani, Tshwete and these guys were pretty supportive of the industrial unions and with SACTU. I would say we had no .., everyone saw, essentially you were trying to build a strong trade union movement but that trade union movement could play an extremely important role in the UDF and the MDM, because it often had much more organisational resources than anyone else.

Facilitator: but then your involvement in union activities, I mean as a white person with an honours degree, you could have lived comfortably earning a good salary and so on. Did that not have an impact on the family and so on, considered?

Respondent: It had an impact on the family. I mean for many of us, in my case it also lead to a divorce with my first wife, the mother of my children. It did have an impact and I think for my children, they often talk about it, but for them it's been positive. I think they learnt, what one learnt in the union movement is very hard to replicate. I learnt a lot about people and organising people. For me it allowed, it gave me insights into black society and so I don't for a second regret that experience, it's a very crucial experience, on how to organise things, how to be strategic, how to negotiate because you're negotiating every five minutes

Facilitator: all the time?

Respondent: ja

Facilitator: and the threats of being arrested and so on?

Respondent: it was not pleasant I think for my wife at the time and many others, we were harassed all the time by police. Once you start these things you want to finish them, you run away from the struggle, I think you ask yourself "what did I do in life".

Facilitator: but then you then became the education secretary of COSATU, I take it that this is because of your job?

Respondent: yes

Facilitator: but the programmes were they a duplication of your previous jobs or COSATU had its own ideas of what education should mean to the society or to the workers?

Respondent: I think we were able to fairly quickly forge some pretty common programmes. It was in that time that we got to know all the leaders from General Workers [Union] better, and we were able to ..., there was in 1987 congress of COSATU there was quite a clash where it was fairly clear that there was a group of ANC comrades who really wanted the unions to be much more aligned openly with ANC and UDF. It led to quite a clash, I don't know if Jay covers it in his book. But that was quite a bitter conference of COSATU. And at that point many of us felt that it is

important to continue building the unions. So I left COSATU and went to NUMSA.

Facilitator: for that particular reason?

Respondent: ja mainly because we felt that it was very important to keep the big unions strong and mineworkers, metal workers are really important in an economy.

Facilitator: your perception of NUMSA, I'm sure you didn't just go there, you took your time to understand the dynamics and so on?

Respondent: I knew them very well because we had built up, in TUACC I had worked with the NUMSA, with the MAWU people and we worked very closely. As FOSATU general secretary I had to spend a lot of time working with the unions to merge them. So the formation of the National Union of Metal Workers in South Africa was a really big achievement because we were bringing together UMMAWOSA, UAW, MACWUSA, Western Province Motor Workers Assembly Union, so I knew those unions very well because I had to spend a lot of time with their leadership as we negotiated a unity move.

Facilitator: You were there for how long, until 1994?

Respondent: until 1993, we were seconded to the Department of Economic Policy in ANC.

Facilitator: but also, to go back a bit, 1989, I had to google a few things to get a sense of your activities, 1989 you an interim executive member of

the ANC in KZN. Was this an open branch, that was before the unbanning of the ANC or there was an underground activity?

Respondent: I can't remember. Well it must have been after the unbanning I think. I think it started just before the unbanning, that was Terror Lekota who recruited me to that because he was the chair there. By that time as I say we had quite a lot of work, working relations with the ANC. In KZN we had to link with the ANC because of the civil war there, so we had to brief them off and we had to .., because we were trying to see if we can get Buthelezi to make peace but it was very difficult. And we had, for many years we had fairly secret negotiations with the IFP, myself, Willies Mchunu who is now the .., and JZ, at one period we used to meet with Mdlalose and Madidi and Zondo who is now the chairman of Inkatha, we used to have secret meetings with them often.

Facilitator: did that pay off?

Respondent: ja I think it was very important. We were able to prevent some very serious confrontations and conflicts.

Facilitator: the role of women within the union structures, where would you place them?

Respondent: I think women organisers played a very important role, some of our strongest organisers in TUACC, right back then were some very strong women, June-rosa Nala, Irene Shongwe, Mbu Dlamini, they were really very strong organisers, played a very important role

Facilitator: Was there a sense of chauvinism from some male comrades?

Respondent: there was, but I mean these were just tough and brave young women, after a while they were so capable that the men had to agree. But women workers were always important particularly in the textile workers and there were some important women leaders that rose other organisers, Lydia Kompe, Zora Zora Mehlomakulu here in the Cape, there were some very strong women shop steward leaders, a few but played an important role.

Facilitator: so did they manage to break through this wall of stereotype guys and ..?

Respondent: ja I would say that in the union movement because of some degree of common struggle that women were well received and respected. It was very hard for men to be critical of women who were braver than them, they eventually had to accept them. But they played a very important role, the women shop steward leaders and you had people, Jane Barrett, and many other women organisers, they played a very important role. But I do think that the unions had an important role to play in, the acceptance that women would play a key role in South Africa's politics

Facilitator: How do you perceive this whole thing ..(unclear) system whereby after 1994 a certain number of unionists had to be deployed within parliament and other structures of the government. Was that the right move by the unions?

Respondent: I do think it was the right move, I think it would have been very difficult to have done anything different but what .., the original

intention unfortunately we were not able to fully implement, the original intention was that it would be a limited number of leaders that would move across, but in practice it became difficult to keep that discipline, so after a while many union leaders slowly moved across. So I think that there was a period when the last of the experienced leaders did become a bit of a problem for the unions. There was a lot of argument about whether when you went into the parliament and into the ANC were you representing COSATU or ANC and I support the view that it would be very difficult, you can't be representing COSATU and in the ANC. Our view was that you then had to succumb to the disciplines of the ANC but that for COSATU it would make its views known through their line structures. There's always been a very complex issue to .., and I think for the union movement it has been frustrating that their ability to impact on policy has not been as great as they had hoped. That's quite a complicated difficult debate about how the align should function and structure, you can see it now in the current strikes, again you've got the same tensions about how the alignment should function. But I think it was useful to have union leaders in that early government. I think the power of COSATU and the fact that there were many union leaders there meant that we were able to pass basically good labour legislation. I think it's pretty good labour legislation. And when the negotiations came, and there was some very difficult negotiations in some of the labour law reforms I think it helped a bit that there were people who understood what the unions were driving at

Facilitator: Would you say that there was enough representation of workers during the CODESA Indaba, to look into such issues as union issues and worker issues?

Respondent: Well I think that the, in CODESA as such, well Cyril and others started to play a very important role, by in large I would say the unions were less formally involved in CODESA but we were much more active in the National Economic Forum. So it was in the National Economic Forum that eventually led to NEDLAC that we put our activities in, to create a structure in government and people often forget that. I mean right from the very beginning in 1994 we created the structure, a National Economic Development And Labour Council (NEDLAC) which has played I think an important role over the years in various ways

Facilitator: but do you think that COSATU should continue to supply the government with comrades or cadres, deployment of people within?

Respondent: I think they should. I mean for me a good model to follow if we could would be what they have in Scandanavia where you've got union leaders going into government and come back out and go to unions again. So movement between unions and government I think is very important, both for government and for the union. I mean we are still at an early stage, there's a tendency that when people go to government they don't come back again.

Facilitator: but is that implementable in South Africa?

Respondent: I think it is, as income levels drives, and when the unions can offer a reasonable income for people, I think they will start to get movement back and forth but now it's difficult for people to move, the disparity between union wages and what the public service pays is too great.

Facilitator: it's huge

Respondent: but if you look at the Scandinavians or Germans or other things, they are able to .., having big unions with resources they can pay a wage which would be comparable to MP's

Facilitator: really. When you look back do you think your involvement in unions was worth it or it was just a waste of time perhaps you should have been a priest?

Respondent: No no it wasn't, since I'm an atheist I wouldn't have done that but no I am endlessly thankful that I took the decision to go into trade unions, for me there's no better organisation in the world than to learn some of the difficulties of modern economies, the effects of capitalism. But also to see how .., if you want to be inspired about what people are able to do, unions are a good place, you see what collective action can do, especially in those times which was extremely difficult time to organise. You learn what human courage is about. So no I don't regret it for a second, it's the best thing that ever happened in my life, tough as it might have been.

Facilitator: is there anything else that you think is important that should have been part of this interview?

Respondent: Well I think at some point I would recommend looking in more detail at the actual organising strategies that the unions used. I think the success of the unions was that they were able to organise against extremely difficult odds and those .., the shop stewards and the leaders that are built in that kind of organising are extremely important

leaders for society as a whole because they are able to be strategic, they've got patience, they know that things can't come easily and they also are able to adjust if they are prepared to talk and fight, they don't have simple solutions, they've got much more sophisticated ..., so I think that unions can develop in society some very important leaders. Even today with COSATU leaders, the experienced leaders are amazing leaders they are very capable experienced people. And if you look at the role that COSATU is being able to play in NEDLAC and through things like the Millennium Labour Council, the impact they've had on business I think these are big achievements.

I think one needs to reflect a little bit on how you keep organisational strength in the unions, my feeling is that they should be slightly stronger than they are but that is not because they are bad unions, it's just that when things get easier how do you keep the energy going

Facilitator: what would be your suggestion?

Respondent: I do think it's important for organisers and shop stewards to have some mobility, you know the full time shop steward movement is worth looking at, that gave people a lot of time to do other things, to learn more skills, the people that had the toughest time are the organisers who have to stay close to the factories because it's hard work, it's not always easy and after a while I think it's exhausting emotionally and as I say I would favour that those union leaders get a chance to get exposed to other activities in government or elsewhere so that they get a wider experience as well. But then it's ..., like all organisations it's difficult to keep the momentum and vitality going, when you've won your struggle that's

sometimes the hardest part to keep things moving. I think that the unions and the union leaders achieved a tremendous amount in this.

Facilitator: I should have asked you something about archives and so on, now I've remembered. At some point in time, FOSATU with its own collections, archival collection of FOSATU of course .., every time these collections have to be contacted, ..(unclear) why is that, the reason?

Respondent: I think it's just the arrangement we had with the archives that we stored, I wouldn't have thought that there's any major problem in that. To the best of my knowledge, most of it .., the person who knows a lot about this is Jenny Grice, she's still with NUMSA but to the best of my knowledge most of these, a lot of the stuff is kept at Killie Campbell in Durban and I think at Wits as well. It was just a condition of the archive material, the reason at the time that we say you've got to ask permission is we didn't want employers or others running in and looking at everything that was happening there but now I think it wouldn't matter.

Facilitator: because its actually creating some bureaucratic nightmare

Respondent: I think you should try and find a way to reduce that because the COSATU ones really has no need for ..(unclear) anymore I don't think. There was also some stuff that was, in KZN some of the documentation was very sensitive relating to self defence of workers against IFP and that

Facilitator: but that stuff was also sent to various archives?

Respondent: Tucked away, you will have to look very hard to find it, Jenny would know, but you have to work very hard to find it, so we tucked it away carefully

Facilitator: do you think it's still in safe hands where ever it is or ?

Respondent: I hope so that's what the archives do, that they keep it safe, I really hope so. I must eventually look through all my stuff and get it archives I've got to think of how to do that somehow because a lot of the documents .., there were some really documents and discussions with Inkatha and or attacks on Inkatha that we didn't want to get leaked into the public.

Facilitator: any closing word maybe?

Respondent: Well just to say that I'm really pleased that you are doing what you're doing and I think that the only suggestion that I would make, is once you've got these basic frameworks, it would often help I think to sit with the group of leaders and say this is what happened then what is your interpretation of it. In fact a few of us were talking about that the other day, we were saying we really need to get together with, because our memories are also getting a bit rusty, so if you've got some of the basic stuff in front of you, you can then reflect how its, what was the meaning, what was the interpretation. When FOSATU had its .., at ..(unclear) 20 or 30 year thing, myself, Chris, Andrew Zulu, Moss Mayekiso and Mashishi from SAMWU we had a panel, we had a panel session and all of us said it would be good to have more things like that for people to remember. I would really encourage you if get the chance to facilitate some kind of bringing together the people so they can talk and you can record. The

interesting thing is that if you were to take me and Sydney Mufamadi, or Jay and Sid Mufamadi or me and Johan Theron, we came to a point where we were the same thing but we went through different roads, we had different perceptions on what was happening, different reasons to what we were doing and it would be wonderful if you could capture some of those different currents and debates

Facilitator: ja, I will talk to Michelle about it and see, organise funding and so on

Respondent: ja, I think some of the big unions have got enough funds these days to sponsor stuff like that

Facilitator: ja perhaps I should talk to them. But look when you talk about archives, people tend to pay less attention I must be honest with you

Respondent: talk to Frans in NUM, I think the NUMSA would be prepared to look at it too

Facilitator: ja, I will speak to them. Sometimes when you go to their offices you find some stuff there in some storage or so

Respondent: ja, that's the problem, the guys who used to keep things well if I remember, I don't know what Mandela said but I will talk to Johan Theron who was secretary of Food and Canning

Facilitator: please

Respondent: I saw him the other day at UCT but I think they kept quite a lot of stuff

Facilitator: talk to him ..(unclear) maybe they've got some stuff somewhere in some garage, we could like put it together and create proper archive

Respondent: yes even if it's archived at UCT or something as long as you've got access to it at Wits so that you could. You can actually create an easy accessible central pool that would be wonderful. So I was really excited that you're doing it, I think it's important

Facilitator: It's an important thing you know because 10/20 years down the line you pass on to kids, it happens a lot as you know

Respondent: You must talk to get insight as to what happened with PE you must really talk to Les Ketteldas and Fred Sauls

Facilitator: do you have their numbers

Respondent: Les's number I still have .., Joe will be able to give you both of those numbers? Also speak to Dave [Lewis], I've got his email and telephone number, the KZN guys you must speak to Mike Mabuyakhulu and the ..(unclear) – he was giving you the contact numbers. Another good guy worth talking to is Jeff Vilane He was in Richards Bay, I have his numbers, Mabuyakhulu will be able to help you with some contacts, Mike and Jeff can give you a lot of information about interaction with UWUSA and Inkatha and he was president of -MAWU for quite a long time.

Another guy who is very important in the Cape Town Municipal Workers, Johnny Ertzen..(unclear), let me see if I have his number

Facilitator: is he still here in Cape Town?

Respondent: ja, Cheadle, he was one of the first organisers in Durban and on labour law, he is the main architect of South Africa's labour law

End