

Sabelo Hobongwana

Facilitator: This is an interview with Sabelo Sydney Hobongwana we are in Uitenhage, Kwa-Nobuhle, the date is 28 March 2011, interview is done by Brown Maaba. Tata thanks for your time, you can speak any language. Tata can you just give me background as to where you were born, how you were raised, whether the family was rich or poor and how you ended up in the world of unions?

Respondent: I was born here in Uitenhage, in Rooihoogte, my mother brought me up, she had separated with my father. Because my mother was not working she sent me to go and live with my grandmother, my father's mother. I was a little bit older then, about 6. This was in 1957, I schooled there. I first schooled at Nduleni lower primary and then went to Dwane higher primary after completing at Nduleni. I went to do my Standard 3 there. I think it was 1966, this is when Verwoerd died. I passed my standard 6 at Dwane, I then continued with my studies, unfortunately I could only study up to Form I, there were no funds to pay for my fees. I was extremely intelligent at school, I was good with Maths and Science. So I stopped there and went to look for a job. I had to work, the first company I worked for is Garbenines Wool Combers, a textile company. We worked from 7 am to 7 pm. I felt pressure for working the long hours. I then decided to resign and look for greener pastures. I then joined Volkswagen in 1972. I worked there, things were difficult also there, coloureds were getting a better treatment compared to the blacks. We then tried to form a trade union but the chances were very slim for us because it was not easy to mobilise the workers to join the union. The only union that existed at the time was Yster and Staal which was for whites and coloureds only, black people were not covered.

Black people were not protected in the workplace, only whites and coloureds were protected, so we also wanted our own union. The law did not protect the black worker. We continued with the struggle at Volkswagen. I then left Volkswagen and joined Good Hope in 1974, things were the same at Good Hope, black people were still oppressed. There was no break, no pension, the showers did not hot running water, we had to shower with cold water. If you want to go to the toilet we were using newspaper, no toilet paper. Black people were not taken into consideration, the coloured people had the best of everything, they were protected and earned better salaries than black people. They were given better jobs also because they spoke Afrikaans. So those were the working conditions at Good Hope.

I think in 1979 unions were being recognised, NAWU was formed at Volkswagen, we then started to fight and wanted our own union. Most textile companies also wanted to have a union, we wanted to link with the unions. Some unions existed at the time but they were unregistered, this is around 1973. Our union was called NUTW, it was for the textile industry. The people in the motor and rubber sector were fighting for their rights because of the oppression. The unions of the rubber and motor sectors were very strong at the time. Unions in the textile industry were very weak, the rubber and motor industry unions taught us a lot about unions, they took us through the processes.

We continued and formed a union irrespective of the conditions. In those days it was not easy to organise workers, one could not just walk into a factory and give them a form to join the union, we had to find ways of organising unions, not at the workplace. In most cases the black workers

were afraid that the coloured people would inform the employers. People were just expected to work, if management discovers that you have an interest in unions you will be victimised. I worked for Cape of Good Hope Wool Combers for almost 34 years, under those conditions, bad conditions. I fought for seven years for people to get the pension, people did not get anything. I won the battle at the time for workers to be given pension. There was a man called John Coblin, he was from university, together with Alec Irwin and Halt Shiddle. They are the ones who educated us on the pension scheme. They also educated us on the provident fund. I became a member of the provident fund in 1986, after working for the company for ten years with no pension. Other people worked for 25 years without pension, we fought for this, it was difficult but eventually we got what we wanted. We were generally fighting for our rights, Cape of Good Hope Wool combers was an organisation which was colonised, controlled by the French. The French people came to South Africa and the boers told them how to treat us, they were informed that black people do not have a say whatsoever. I was fortunate that they never fired me even though I fought for my rights.

The trade union was registered and recognised by the employer. I started as a shop steward, then I was elected as senior shop steward and then elected as a branch member, then NEC member, then elected as Central Committee Member of NUDW. I carried on with the struggle until 1986 where I ended my career. The shop steward term was two years, but because people believed in me, and because I was strong, people kept on re-electing me. I served six or seven years as a shop steward.

After that I informed my colleagues that we should give other people a chance to proceed with the struggle of the trade union movement. The

struggle is for all our people. From there I was elected by white union, solidarity to represent the interest of the white people being a black man. I was strong, but did not last in this position. I resigned.

Facilitator: did you resign from the company or from the union?

Respondent: I resigned from the trade union as a shop steward of the solidarity. My shop steward term in NUDW had ended, I had served for seven years, so I resigned officially and carried on with my work. I was later given a position as a Setter and thereafter I was given the position of Production Foreman. My career ended when I was given the position of Comic?? Fitter. I was retrenched not because I was not performing but because our company was going down, it was liquidated. So SACTU and Solidarity advised us that all people with a long service in the company, in order to protect their pensions it is better for them to take the package. So we did that, we left the company. According to the South African government law if a company is liquidated, the first people to be paid out are the creditors. So we decided to accept the package and pulled out. I did not leave my job because I was lazy I was still strong enough to work. So my career with Cape of Good Hope wool combbers stopped last year on 20 May 2010.

We were told that if there is improvement in the economy, they will call us back, we might be reinstated. This was the agreement between SACTU and the Solidarity. All people who are retrenched will be re-instated. China has also informed South Africa that they will not buy wool from South Africa for at least a year.

Facilitator: Just to go back, a few questions. You started working at Garbenings as a Operator. Why is it that you never formed a union there? How were the conditions?

Respondent: No one could have thought of forming a union because people were happy with the conditions of the company. Garbenings was far better than Cape of Good Hope Wool Combers. We worked from 7 to 7, there was a break. We did not have a reason to form a trade unions, we were given breaks, we were being given a ration of pies, coffee during break time. In 12 hours we were given an hour's break, and then after that we break for 15 minutes, and then 10 minutes.

Facilitator: But did it ever happen at Garbenings? Did they ever start a trade union?

Respondent: The trade union was formed after I left the company, it was in 1975.

Facilitator: Why did you leave Garbenings?

Respondent: I left them because of the long hours, 12 hours a day, I was young at the time and was living with my grandparents. You know when you are young you don't care, whether you have a job or not, you will be fed by either your brother or grandparents. So I left. I had no responsibility at the time, I had no kids, I just decided to resign, I didn't want to work 12 hours. I was a young man at the time.

Facilitator: And then you looked for a job at Volkswagen?

Respondent: Yes I got a job at Volkswagen

Facilitator: you chose to go back and look for a job?

Respondent: There was no pressure on me to get a job, I was sleeping on the floor, next to the window, but then one day at midnight/sun set I heard someone voice calling me saying you must go to Volkswagen in the morning you will get a job. My ancestors spoke to me. I woke up in the morning, did not speak to anyone in the house, I just left and went to Volkswagen. I was called by the guy who was employing people, the place was packed, there was a long queue but I was given a job. So Regionald Majodina saw me and called me, he was told by his ancestors and my ancestors to employ me. That is how I got a job at Volkswagen.

Facilitator: You also mentioned that you tried to form a union at Volkswagen, did it ever work?

Respondent: You know the situation at Volkswagen was very difficult at the time because there were people like John Gomomo, he was working for Mercedesbenz. When I joined the company there were people who had been there longer, they understood the worker problems. They formed what was called Liaison committees, there was also something called the Steering Committee. The name of the shop steward came into effect after the employers recognised the Steering Committees. The committees were invited to seminars by people from Wits University, people like Phil Bona I think, he was a lecturer at the time. Wits invited people who showed an interest in the union movement, the university also had a good knowledge about the labour movement. The name of Steering Committee was changed to shop steward. To date we still have

shop stewards. After receiving education on the unions from Wits, there were so many changes. John Coplin, Phil Bona and Schiddle were running the workshops. There were so many lecturers, white lecturers. I cannot remember them all.

I remember in 1983 I went to Jo'burg to attend the funeral of Neil Hagett. It was the first time I met the ANC in Jo'burg at the Portuguese Hall.

Facilitator: You also mentioned that coloured workers were protected, what do you mean by that?

Respondent: Coloured people were protected in terms of, they were allowed to join the white trade unions simply because they understood the language of the white boers. They were allowed to join the trade union because of that.

Facilitator: so why did you leave Volkswagen?

Respondent: I left Volkswagen because management was abusing their power when I was debating with the coloured people about my rights. Management allowed coloured people to walk all over us, we are doing the same job but the coloured person is above me. We had an argument. So I slapped one coloured and kicked him. The coloured believed that they were superior to us. We were working overtime at the time, so I was fired.

Facilitator: Good Hope, when was the union recognised?

Respondent: it was recognised in, you know there was a huge strike just before the union was recognised. At the time I was working at ..(unclear) .., Volkswagen workers were demanding R2 per hour at the time, I was working day shift, my shifts were rotating and at the time I was an assistant shop steward. The shop steward who was working the day shift was responsible for everything that happens during the day shift. He had to communicate to other day shift shop stewards. The shop stewards had to work together when there's a problem. So when I arrived there everything was on stand still. I asked what was going on, they told me that they are demanding R2 an hour. Volkswagen and Cape of Good Hope could not be compared because the products produced are not the same. So if Volkswagen was demanding for instance R50 an hour, there is no way Textile can demand that amount, they cannot be in a position to demand the same amount because of the business they are in, the products are completely different from each other. Wool is not expensive which is true. The motor industry is completely different from wool. Car prices go up therefore the motor industry can demand increases if it is acceptable globally.

Facilitator: but then you became a shop steward at Good Hope, what were the burning issues that needed to be attended to?

Respondent: There was so many burning issues in that company because I was the one who formed the trade union in the company because of the bad working conditions. People would be suspended midnight or after midnight for not coming to work maybe over the weekend. For instance, if a person did not turn up for night shift on Sunday, they would let him come to work, work and then suspend him at midnight or after midnight. The security would accompany this person to the locker room,

from the locker room he would be sent out. How does one get home at that time of the night. Those were the things that encouraged me to form the union. Black people and coloured people would be employed at the same time, doing the same job but the coloured would be given protective clothing from day one and not the black person. Black people were expected to use their own clothes, their safety was not taken into consideration. In some instances the black people would be given protective clothing after two weeks. This is when I asked everybody let us come together and form a trade union. It was not easy.

I believe management was very scared of me, if they were doing something wrong I would tell them, I never allowed a foreman or general foreman to speak to me as they wish. If they are rude to me I would retaliate.

Facilitator: You said it was not easy to form the union, what were the problems?

Respondent: The problems in Cape of Good Hope, most of the people working in the company were people from rural areas. All they wanted was a job they didn't care about the working conditions. So when we were retaliating against the employer they did not support us, they were scared all they wanted was to work. They would also tell us that where they come from there are no jobs and they wanted to hang on to the jobs they had. That is why it was not easy for us to get them to join because they wanted to keep their jobs. The company also used tactics to employ people from rural areas. They would go to the rural area with a kombi full of bread and fish, and say to them "we want only men for the job, we have food, we will feed them", so people would come rushing to

the kombi. They would first eat and when they are full the kombi would just drive away with them straight to Cape of Good hope. When they arrive at Cape of Good Hope they take them to the hostels. That is why people from rural areas were not interested in joining the trade unions, they had nowhere to go, they were living in the hostels and also when they think about where they come from, they have to make money in order to feed their families. It was not easy for them to get jobs.

As time went on I won the battle, at a later stage they joined the union. I managed to convince them to join, I told them that they had no future, as they get older they will not get any pension. I fought for 7 years for the pension scheme at Cape of Good Hope. Pension was recognised in 1986, ten years after I joined Cape of Good hope. It was not easy.

Facilitator: what about the employers themselves, did they simply accept and let you form a union?

Respondent: the employers at a later stage because of people showing them that they do not accept the working conditions, there were go slows. I taught people what a go slow is and how it is done, by not being productive, not to reach their targets. The production was slowed down. The company was forced to recognise the union because of the pressure. The recognition agreement was signed. Shop stewards were not allowed to attend or address union meetings. Eventually the shop stewards were allowed to attend/address meetings inside the plant. They were also given an opportunity to go to people and understand their grievances. Safety was a big issue, a lot of people were dying. We won the battle.

Facilitator: other than issues around safety and so on, were there other problems that needed to be addressed?

Respondent: there were problems which needed to be addressed. I am now going to talk about promotions in the plant. Chances for a black person to be promoted were very slim. I fought for that. I was the first black person to be promoted to foreman in that company

Facilitator: really?

Respondent: so after that, others were promoted, the employer set an example by promoting me, the employer and employees respected me. Production improved and I also communicated well with my fellow workers. So the company realised that they should promote more blacks than white people, they realised that white people were not doing anything. White people would be in the smoking area most of the time and they also did not know the job. They did not even know how to lead the people. I was promoted from operator to setter and then as foreman, and then later as a fitter. I had worked in all those departments and understood them well.

Facilitator: Did Cape of Good Hope employ women?

Respondent: yes at a later stage women were employed, what they did was do the sorting at the stores, checking the length of the wool, they were mainly measuring the length of the wool. What they would do is they would put this wool here and just pull it (he was illustrating) – they were measuring. The job was done by women. As time went on the company introduced this evil thing called outsourcing. The women were

outsourced by the company to the contractors. People lost their benefits .., their pensions were paid out, so it meant they had no pension or medical aid. Just like the labour brokers. To date we still have labour brokers. People who are outsourced do not have benefits. In the plants those people who were outsourced were members of the trade union. I couldn't understand why the trade unions allowed for those people to be outsourced, their benefits were taken away from them. Later on, a few of the women were put onto the production so that they can operate the machines. Its not easy for a female to operate a machine because one bobbin weighed 50 kg which is very heavy for a man too. I couldn't pick up the bobbin and put it to the hose and then use the hose to lift the bobbin up. So the women did not manage to do this work, so the company decided to get rid of them one by one. Some of the bobbins weighed 140 kg bobbin. It was never easy for anyone to lift the bobbin and put it in a trolley. I also couldn't understand why they expected women to do this job, so when they failed they were fired. That was the company's strategy to get rid of the women in the production line.

Facilitator: Did the women have maternity benefits, overtime, exploitation etc? How were those things attended to?

Respondent: female people in Cape of Good Hope if they were full time staff by the company they were given maternity leave, even after they were outsourced they still had maternity benefits, but they had no medical aid, pension they still have. Medical aid was taken away from them whilst they were outsourced.

Facilitator: what about shifts?

Respondent: Female workers were doing the same rotating shifts as men because there was a conveyor, they had to do the picking at the conveyor. When the wool was dyed it had to be dried, so the heat of the wool is too much so they would have to pick out the remnants and throw them outside. The work was done by females, eventually they were also outsourced too. They started doing rotating shifts for the contract company, the work was outsourced. To date no females are full time employed at Cape of Good Hope, they are all outsourced, they got rid of all the females in the plant. There's a rumour in the plant that the men and the women are having affairs so that is why the supervisors encouraged the company to outsource the women. Apparently the men and women would leave the conveyor belt alone and carry on with their business. Some of the problems are caused by our own people. If one had to take a case up, one would lose the case.

Facilitator: but most of the time, cases involved what, what were the cases in the workplace? What kind of cases had to be solved?

Respondent: they had to separate the men and women in order to solve the problem, the women had to work alone and the men had to work alone in different shifts.

Facilitator: were there major strikes that took place at Good Hope?

Respondent: You know, in Cape of Good Hope, there was a strike which started recently just before I left the company because of low production, management wanted higher volumes of production, they wanted the targets to be reached, at the same time they wanted to reduce less working hours, three or four days. This is unfair. The workers produced a

five day production in three days – after this the workers decided to stop working on all three shifts, they protested in front of the offices. Every break they have they are protesting. The workers feel they are being exploited.

Facilitator: so its still not resolved?

Respondent: still not resolved. Also what is happening after I left, I heard that people who are working overtime, 7 to 7 are not paid time and half for the overtime, they only pay the normal rate. Sometimes people are paid for 2 hours even though they have worked 6 hours. The situation is like that at the moment and is pathetic, people are losing out.

Facilitator: You also mentioned earlier that you became a branch chairperson when you were still a shop steward. What were the challenges of running a branch?

Respondent: there were so many challenges of running a branch because during those years because at the time we would go around and check all the textile companies, whether their unions are recognised in the companies or not. If they are not recognised we will decide on what action to take so that the company can recognise the trade unions. We would look at alternatives to recognise the trade union. As a branch we also had to look into the finances of the union, check whether subscriptions are paid to date or not, how much is being received in a certain area, for instance, Uitenhage, PE, how much the monthly subscription is, the expenditure etc. We would check all the finances. We would also check the finances with the auditors, check the finances of the NEC, the branch all levels up to the central committee. Compare the

expenditure in the national and the central committee, check all the levels. We also checked the salaries of the organisers, the maintenance of cars, etc. We had to keep records and be accountable with the finances and report back at the central committee.

Facilitator: you also affiliated under FOSATU, am I right, the union?

Respondent: FOSATU yes – it was myself, Dube, John Gomomo, Dora Langbooi, Gane Donald Nxawana, Erin Kinkombo and other people. We were talking about unity, we wanted to topple the apartheid regime government. We would meet and discuss how to go about – all the trade unions formed a mother body. We went to Hammanskraal in 1981 I think, all the trade union movements were there, the mother body was there, FOSATU was formed (not sure what he is saying here) in Hammanskraal and was considered to be FOSATU. We carried on and got FOSATU t-shirts, jackets, etc. – it was not enough because the mining unions and other unions did not want to become part and parcel of the formation of FOSATU. So we struggled again for years to try and make the unions understand what we wanted to do. So we negotiated with those unions until they understood and formed another umbrella body, we formed COSATU. The other unions also joined when COSATU was formed. The battle continued. Some other unions still do not belong to COSATU – most of the trade unions fall under COSATU now.

Facilitator: you also became a shop steward of solidarity later?

Respondent: the solidarity union was mainly for white people, the white people knew me and wanted me to represent them because I was very strong. White people would lift their fist for “viva” not in front of

management but only when management is not there, they used black people because they knew that black people were not scared. They wanted to protect their jobs at black people's expense, they didn't want to be seen as protesters, they were afraid of management. I was the first black person who was on salaried staff to join this white union. When you are salaried staff you cannot belong to the union of hourly paid staff. You are also moved from the pension scheme of weekly earners to the salaried staff pension scheme.

Facilitator: did this not cause tensions for you?

Respondent: It did not raise tensions because we all understood each other.

Facilitator: were you ever victimised because you were always in the forefront of the unions?

Respondent: no, I'm not a weak person, I'm a strong person. Whenever they tried to victimise me they never succeeded because I am a very strong person.

Facilitator: but also when 1990/94 came, do you think that there were changes in the lives of the workers?

Respondent: ja there were a lot of changes in 1994, even up to now the World Cup, people were given vuvuzelas by the company, that is a change – management is moving a little bit

Facilitator: you also mentioned that this was a French company?

Respondent: Cape of Good Hope remained as a French company until .., I don't know who Cape of Good Hope belongs to now, I heard that the Chinese people are Cape of Good Hope customers. I know the French people still remain there. I do not have enough information since I left the company, what I know is when I left the company was liquidated. So the financial manager was promoted to managing director, the person who was the maintenance manager was also retrenched. There are two people who are running the company, its Rian and Chris, that's it.

Facilitator: when you look back, was the Industrial Council effective in this particular workplace?

Respondent: The industrial council I am not quite sure .., I doubt whether it was effective or not, I don't think they were informed, CCMA was informed. People from CCMA worked together with management – to date I still have not received some of my pension from Cape of Good Hope. The MD stole our money, the money is apparently available now but I still don't get my pension. We were told our pension will be paid out in December, to date it has not been released. Next week I want to do a follow up at the factory, it ranges up to R8 million.

Facilitator: other than strikes were there other methods that you used to bring the employer to the table?

Respondent: ja there were methods, management was nailed down by the shop stewards, Cape of Good Hope as I told you had two unions, there was SACTU which represented the hourly paid people and then solidarity which was representing the salaried staff. So both trade unions

fought together to nail the management down. In fact solidarity was a weak union because it's a union of white people with white officials. White people did not want to fight the employer openly, they did not want to fight white people. SACTU is the best union in that company. A decision taken by management and SACTU was the final decision and was the sole decision. Solidarity would just listen to what decisions were taken they did not have any inputs. Solidarity was just puppets that would just rubber stamp management. SACTU is a strong union.

Facilitator: do you believe unions are still effective today?

Respondent: The trade unions are still effective to date, although after I was retrenched, I believe there are a lot of complaints, the unions are not as strong as they were before. Coloured people are still there, they are still being used by management as tools to weaken the trade unions. Coloured people are only interested in getting opportunities for themselves, promotions, anything that will benefit them only. If they are appointed as shop stewards they will not do their job properly because all they are after is being promoted by management. They do not represent the workers. The union is not so strong now.

Facilitator: but in all this, your involvement in the unions, did this not have an effect on your family in some way?

Respondent: no in those years, I was promoted as a foreman in 1989, I carried on with my duties, then in 1989 people of Cape of Good Hope demanded their pension – the pension in Cape of Good Hope was introduced in 1986, ten years after I had been there. The workforce at the time was 783 – so people went on strike in 1989 demanding their pension

scheme – the pension was introduced in 1986, so as I told you that recently when you are promoted you are moved from the hourly paid category to the salaried staff category. So I belonged to the pension scheme not to the provident fund, my provident fund was also transferred to the pension scheme. Now people started negotiating and they reached a deadlock. People from Jo'burg, people like John Koplín was there, Holtin Scheddle was there, a lot of trade union people came to Cape of Good Hope. The negotiations took place day and night in order to protect the people, so that they don't lose their jobs. You know when you say you demand your pension there are a lot of things which needed to be calculated, the interest in the pension, all of those things. Everybody was dismissed in 1989. The strike continued, and they were paid out, it was not a lot of money, their pension was effected from November 1986, 1987 and 1989, it is almost two years six months. It was not a lot of money, R3000 something. They got their pension money and unemployment. After they had spent all their money ... - after I was promoted I created opportunities for other black people to be promoted. So we were three now. After that their money was finished and they came back .., they petrol bombed my house. I was working night shift at that time, 10-06. They first cut off the telephone cables, the phone was not working around this time, I went to work, when I arrived at work at about 10:20, I received a call from my neighbour telling me that my house is on fire, it has been petrol bombed. Fortunately my wife was flexible, the petrol bomb hit the corner unit, there was no electricity in those years ...(unclear) so the bomb hit the corner of the unit and burnt the kitchen curtain. It was not such a big damage. So there were problems after my promotion, people saw me as a person who is part and parcel of management. According to the company policy if you are promoted and you belong to management, but I was not part and parcel of the

negotiating team, I did not negotiate with them for the pension, I was just there as a foreman. I was part of management team not sitting on the negotiation table. As I told you when they deadlocked I was not there, I was not part of the decision to fire those people.

Facilitator: the last two questions. Was it worth it to be involved in the unions or do you think you wasted your time?

Respondent: no, the trade union movement, I saw it as a good thing. During the apartheid era if you were promoted, you could not be part of the management. Management had used the strategy of promoting people so that they can be brainwashed. As a member of the trade union member you are against management whereas if you are on salaried staff you are part of management. The trade union was helpful for people. As a result you will notice that most of the companies join trade unions because trade unions are helpful and is the only weapon that can protect workers from being exploited by the white capitalist. You cannot fight management alone. If management says you cannot be there they do it just to victimise you if you are not a union member. If you join the trade union it is not easy for you to lose your job.

Facilitator: is there anything that you think we did not discuss that should have been part of this interview?

Respondent: I think we covered everything. I've just remembered something, my first born studied electrical engineering he is with Eskom in Durban. Sometime ago I called the factory and asked for a bursary, he is brilliant with Maths and Science. I go to my MD to try and get him a bursary – I thought the company would help me, I was told to go and ask

from management. The company told me that they do not fund bursaries that I should pay. The company could not help me.

Facilitator: any last words?

Respondent: yes, I am generally a busy person. I presently do not work but I want to thank people like you who came as far as Wits to come and interview a person like myself. I really appreciate your efforts I didn't realise that we were recognised especially by a university for what we did in the past.

Facilitator: did you ever find out why your house was bombed?

Respondent: it was bombed by the boers, I am also a member of the African National Congress, so some meetings were held here in my house, my brothers from exile would send me letters or call me asking to hold a meeting here. My house used to be packed with members of the ANC.

Facilitator: so you were also active in community issues?

Respondent: yes, I am still active in community issues, I am everything.

Facilitator: thanks for your time tata.

END

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