

Andile Nxaba Mosuthwana

Facilitator: This is an interview with Andile Nxaba Musuthwana we are in Fort Beaufort, the interview is done by Brown Maaba. Thanks for your time. Please give me a background about where you were born, the family, whether you are from a rich or poor family, how you ended up in union structures?

Respondent: I was born in a place called Hilltown, a village Tyatyora Location. I started my lower education from Hilltown up to the level of high school. Then when Hilltown was burned down in September 1977 we had no choice, at that time we were doing Form 3, that is what it was called at the time. So we were supposed to go to Form 4. I managed to finalise my then Form 9 and 10 at Mabela High school in Alice. Since I was coming from a poor family they couldn't afford for me to proceed with my studies. I had to look for an alternative job. I completed Form 10, (standard 10) in 1979, so the whole of 1980 I struggled to get a job. Hence I was appointed by the Post Office on 2 January 1981.

My involvement with the trade unions started with the Post Office. During that time in the labour movement, we were governed by the Labour Relations Act of 1956 which restricted workers to form their own unions. As a result we had to come with other strategies of realising ..(unclear), but because the environment which I was working in was under the Bantu stand government, it was even difficult to form things like unions. We had to go underground, and come with a strategy to mobilise workers and sensitise them by forming what we called Burial Association. With that one there was a ..(unclear) so called ..(unclear), in the part of what we called Eastern Administration, in your area, PE and surrounding areas. The

..(unclear) 1986, you know there was that challenge, we ensured that workers are being unionised, so we have to use a strategy. From there we emerged very strongly as workers as a result of that .., I remember working at the Alice Post Office, this is where my leadership started, as a shop steward at Alice.

We were operating under difficult situation, our struggle, the revolution, the labour movement, our enemy was the employer at that time. We were able to identify the enemy and our main focus was to improve the working conditions of the workers. I was involved in a number of industrial actions, in a form of strike. There was a big strike in the Eastern Cape between 1991 and 1992, where the strength of the union was tested. At that time we further managed to enter into an agreement with the administration of that time with the Post Office, an agreement to recognise us as an association.

As I mentioned earlier on in terms of the actions we embarked upon, the strength of the union was even tested further, at that time we had what we call in management, seconded official from the Republic of SA at that time vs the Bantu stand government, the so called Ciskei. We managed to deal with that element of the so called whites being there, seconded to us with the aim of educating us to take some strategic position. They failed, instead they saw that as self management. When that thing was brought to our attention as a union we managed to chase them away.

Facilitator: and how was that changed, what did you guys do to ensure it changes?

Respondent: After we managed to chase them away, it was an opportunity for Poxo at that time to transform, the so called Post and Telecommunication department within the Ciskei department ..., hence black people emerged by taking senior positions but not from us as an organisation, but we managed to identify the capable cadres with the aim of leading the process of transformation. At the time it was called Affirmative Action. Then within the process, maybe because of my strength and leadership style, that I adopted for some time I moved from being a shop steward to other levels of the organisation. I was once elected as a chairperson of the Ciskei branch, then at that time there was a demand that both Ciskei and the rest of Poxo we need to integrate the structures to reflect the real Poxo. At that time, after two or three years, leading the Ciskei branch, I handed over to the border region. Then we moved from having a Ciskei branch to have a border at the time.

Then, from the era of 1994 we hosted the 1994, we continued with the struggle, fighting to be recognised as Poxo in the Ciskei. We managed to achieve that. Then there was a resolution that was taken by COSATU "One Industry One Union, One Federation". At that time we had to .., there were three associations. There was Piarsa, Sabtina, emerged with Poxo to form what we call today 1996 ..(unclear), even that time, in the constitution workers were ..(unclear), I was once elected as the deputy chairperson of the region of Ikhu in the border region. Before that I was a sector co-ordinator of the border region, then after that I was electe4d as deputy chairperson. From there I was elected as sector co-ordinator of the province. Then in 1998 I was nominated or appointed as a full time shop steward, 8 April 1998 to date.

Between now and that time of the real struggle you know, the struggle today is very, how can I put it, not painful, we were able to identify the enemy then but today it is difficult because the enemy is within ourselves. You know some comrades don't want to say those things, even now the understanding of the workers post-1994, or before 1994, because currently we are dealing with a new worker. The way I understand it today, if we don't start political education at high school level for the learners to understand the labour movement. When they go into the employment field they must understand the roles they need to play. Currently a new worker for instance, you go and recruit, they don't even have a clue about the role that need to be played by a member at the workplace. The struggle should change now, fighting for the wage increase. There are a number of issues that we need to take into account. The issue of poverty, we need to join hands with the political parties, demonstrating and fighting for poverty alleviation and the high rate of unemployment.

Facilitator: what do you mean when you say that post 1994 the enemy was within yourselves, what does that mean?

Respondent: You see, before 1994, we were able to identify the enemy as the labour movement. The enemy was the employer. Currently the struggle has changed, has taken another form. For instance when I say the enemy is within ourselves. There are comrades for instance currently who are using that ladder of being in leadership position to achieve their own selfish, personal gains, what we call self enrichment. When they are on the other side of management they try to dilute the membership for their own selfish gains. You go to a particular meeting, management know what we are going to discuss, when we go and engage with

management they are already prepared because we are already, we are infiltrated by the employer.

Facilitator: Is there anything that can be done to change the situation of the enemy within?

Respondent: Ja, you see, if our own unions could rather seriously embark on a political education programme of ensuring that .., you know we take you for granted. If you go and recruit and employee, he or she will understand the role and what is expected from him/her in terms of the trade union. But because they don't get the inductions, given the basic training, most of the resources that we have should be channelled to the political education programme. Maybe it might change, and also the unions if they can embark on an intensive programme that targets learners at high school and tertiary level. It is unfortunate that I am not well vested with the current curriculum whether it talks to the issues that I've raised.

For instance in other countries like Cuba, if you go to Cuba there's nothing else that learners in their curriculum they read or learn, it's about communism.

Facilitator: You mentioned the ..(unclear) with the workers, ..(unclear), but what does that money go to then, the union money?

Respondent: sorry.?

Facilitator: You said that the bulk of the budget doesn't go into training workers..?

Respondent: I'm saying if the bulk of our resources could be channelled through that political training programme, it might change the situation.

Facilitator: Just to go back a bit, you mentioned that there was a strike, Hilltown was burned down ..?

Respondent: no I was just giving you a little background of where I grew up. Hilltown was burnt down in September 1997

Facilitator: by the students?

Respondent: well up to now no one could actually give the real reason of burning the school. But one maybe could say the influence of the uprising of 1976

Facilitator: and the students at Hilltown at the time were the militant, how did you perceive them?

Respondent: yes they were militant. Remember Hilltown is one of the historical institutions where leaders like Umtata, Nelson Mandela, they were educated there and they were staying in a hostel there. I remember they elders were showing us where he was staying in the hostel. And then the struggle continued even after they had left because Hilltown was accommodating all students ..(unclear)

Facilitator: and you yourself went into the world of Post Office as a worker. What inspired you to be a trade unionist or to be militant, where does this come from?

Respondent: I think this actually emerged when I was in school. I played a role in the student movement at the school level and also when I joined the Post Office maybe the background, because I brought it along, coming from a background of a poor family, you don't want to see other people struggling, this encouraged me to take a leadership position. I wanted to be part of the trade union movement.

Facilitator: so the Post Office trade union when you came in was it there already, when you joined or was it developed over time?

Respondent: It was developed over time, since I was saying for instance, we had to go underground and would merge with .., you know at that time people were afraid when you talked about trade unions, they would say you are a terrorist, so we had to come up with a plan and approach hence we had to say let's actually establish what we call a Burial Association whilst at the back of our minds it was a way of mobilising workers, putting them together.

Facilitator: did that work?

Respondent: It did work, we were first branch of Poxo (Poto) in the Ciskei was here in Alice

Facilitator: which year, when was the first branch established?

Respondent: It was between 1986 and 1988, I'm not quite sure about the year. I remember between 1990 .., we started engaging management to recognise us as a union, but we said let's rather engage them as an

association. Remember at that time associations were regarded as association, no political affiliation. We always talked about staff association, the voice of the workers, nothing else, nothing more.

Facilitator: and then also you became a shop steward of the union, what were the challenges that came with that package?

Respondent: the challenge with the package was that, you know I was saying that we were working in an environment where the working conditions had to be changed by us as a union because management was focussing on work related issues. The issues that affect the workers they did not attend to, we had to play a meaningful role of changing the environment to a working environment. There were a number of issues, the workplace, how people were remunerated etc., there were a number of issues that we had to deal with. And I think with the type of leadership that we had at the time, we actually managed all what was required at that time

Facilitator: and the kind of issues that affected the workers in the 1980s, what did they involve in terms of this particular union (phone rang) – what did the issues involve?

Respondent: I think the most fundamental issue that we had to deal with, the manner in which the employer was treating the workers, the oppression of workers in the workplace, they were not treated like human beings, so we had to, on a daily basis deal with that challenge.

Facilitator: but was this union, Ciskei based, ..(unclear) a national union?

Respondent: the national union was Poxo/Potwa?, but because we were operating in a different administration of a Bantu Stand at the time, things were different from for instance, the Eastern Cape side administration, that is the BE?? And the border because at that time we fell under Ciskei homeland. So the challenges were different for them and us, they were different, but there were common challenges that we could share with them

Facilitator: what were those challenges?

Respondent: one as I said it was the oppression of the workers by the employer, secondly the working conditions, for instance the .., a working condition for instance you have to come early at work and then leave late, there were no labour act that would regulate the working hours for instance. You can come at 6 and leave late at 8, there's nowhere where you can complain about. And also how people were remunerated. So we had to engage. For instance we were being dictated to, they dictated the salary increase that would be given to you at that time. So at the time when we had the association it was the voice of ht workers at that time and engaged management on a number of issues. Remember at that time government would say we are giving you 5% you had to take it or leave it.

Facilitator: But also you were at one time the chairperson of the Ciskei branch, what were the challenges of such a position?

Respondent: One challenge for instance, Ciskei was vast. When you go to a meeting you have to go out and give feedback to the workers, sometimes if you are engaging management you have to gather a

mandate from the workers. Most of the time you are not at work rather than doing your union work.

Facilitator: Issues around victimisation by the bosses and so on?

Respondent: As I'm saying, the issue of oppression was rife at that time, victimisation at work. I remember one time when I was elected as a shop steward, one branch manager, branch post master visited my .., I was brought up by my grandmother and grandfather. He told them that the work I'm doing is dangerous etc. I told them that I've been intimidated and victimised. My grandmother and grandfather supported me at the time. Victimisation for instance, management would tell our members not to join the association because if you join it, you are joining a terrorist group. They were victimising workers and coercing them not to become members of the union. Another victimisation, for instance since I was appointed on 2 January 1981 they won't promote me, that's another problem if you are involved. They will come to you and say if you leave the politics we will promote you. Some people fall into that trap.

Facilitator: was the union political aligned maybe?

Respondent: yes the union was politically aligned. For instance at the time when I was working at the Post Office I was also secretary of the branch of the Youth League, I was also involved, with, at that time I was the co-ordinator for Hilltown and Alice for the UDF, you remember at the time. We were holding our meetings at the University of Fort Hare.

Facilitator: Now the struggle of the workers and the township struggles, was there a link between the two whereby there could be some direct overlapping?

Respondent: You see I was involved with UDF as a co-ordinator in Hilltown, Hilltown is surrounded by villages. So most of my time even in the movement, most of the time I got involved even in the villages. I never had that experience in the township or town you know because at that time our challenge was actually to dismantle the Bantu Stand government.

Facilitator: did that succeed?

Respondent: we did succeed

Facilitator: okay. Were there issues of arrest or torture for being in a union?

Respondent: Torture was there because sometimes we would hold our own meetings and then be distracted by police. I remember at one time we had our own meeting where we were disrupted by Ciskei police

Facilitator: You mentioned the fact that recruitment was difficult ,,?

Respondent: It was very difficult at that time

Facilitator: why if I may ask?

Respondent: You know operating under the so-called Ciskei homeland at that time, you will find that there is ..(unclear) supporters that have direct influence for instance, for even, getting employment. If you got employment through those so called particular structures led by the homeland leaders then you have to town the line. There were those who were genuine, like myself who applied, underwent training etc. So with recruitment you will find that the political environment outside, the work situation, will influence our performance as a union in terms of recruiting those workers. I'm not sure whether you understand what I'm saying

Facilitator: I do

Respondent: as a result while operating inside a particular office, you know there are spies for that government within the Post Office, on a daily basis for instance they report to top management. As a result I was actually transferred to a number of Post Offices for no reason. I remember being given a transfer from Alice to Perdy??, then instead of like, I resisted first but I had to go there. And it was valuable for me to be there because I managed to recruit a lot of members, the Poto/Poxo had become stronger, and they decided "what are we going to do with this man", the only thing they could do was not to promote me, but to stop me to continue with my political work they couldn't

Facilitator: What about women, where will you put women in this union? Were they active or not?

Respondent: Honestly women were the actual targets for the government, for various reasons that I cannot give you. You will find that some of them become the agents of the government, spying on us,

reporting to them our movements and so on. And you will find that in terms of the staff complement of various Post Office you will find there are more women than men. Even today if you can look at the statistics of establishment in the former Transkei homeland, you will find that 90 or 95% are women, maybe there was some sort of recruitment, ..(unclear) we don't know. But I am saying when it comes for women, it took time for us even now to be elected into our structures as a unionist. Women emancipation is still key and fundamental for us to actually focus on it.

Facilitator: and issues that affected women like maternity leave and so on, did they have those kinds of benefits in the early 1980s?

Respondent: no we didn't have

Facilitator: and how did you ..(unclear) with the unions?

Respondent: we actually, when we began Ipoto/Ipoxo of the border, broadly speaking we managed to engage further, hence I was talking about these working conditions. Working conditions talked to those issues of working hours, your maternity leave, there was no maternity leave at that time. For instance if you fall pregnant, you are not at work they will replace you. So we had to engage as a union to change the working conditions. Even now currently, the achievement through union is more favourable more than the Act, the Act for instance you have six months maternity leave, and four months fully paid, but at that time maternity leave was not recognised, there was not benefit. So we had to draw in more benefits for workers, not necessarily for the wage bill

Facilitator: When you became full time shop steward in 1998 ..?

Respondent: for instance a full time shop steward gave rise by an agreement between ..(unclear) management to have 9 shop stewards nationally, since we have in our structures 9 provinces, so each province was allocated one full time shop steward from the Post Office and one full time steward from Telkom

Facilitator: so you have since been in that position?

Respondent: to date yes

Facilitator: what has been the achievements and the downside of this?

Respondent: The achievement, before we didn't have full time shop stewards, shop stewards were released to what we call a recognition agreement which is collective agreement between us as an union and management, as to when can we release shop steward, shop stewards would be released to attend seminars, to attend COSATU conferences, our own conferences, but there was also limitations. But having full time shop stewards, it actually assisted to have a person who is going to be released from your duties as an employee of the Post Office and become a full time shop steward doing union duties on a full time basis. The experience is that more work I'm doing it, attending national meetings, than attending provincial meetings. The challenge is that one person cannot be ..(unclear) to serve the interest of the workers of the Eastern Cape given the vastness of the Eastern Cape, geographically speaking.

Facilitator: and cases of dismissal how were they taken care of, or have things changed since 1994, are things better now with the laws and so on or are things still the same?

Respondent: You know pre-1994 workers were just dismissed, you were told that you've been fired, there is no fair hearing, but now because of having the Labour Relations Act, which allows that ..., Schedule 8, that there must be some investigation and you must be informed about the investigation and you must be given a fair hearing, go to a disciplinary hearing where you can present your case. Pre 1994 you were just told that you are fired, you cannot even appeal or do anything

Facilitator: what should have been the role of unions post 1994, you mentioned earlier the fact that some people are now looking for their own benefits through the unions and not caring about the workers, which direction was the unions supposed to take?

Respondent: pre 1994?

Facilitator: after 1994?

Respondent: My point of view was that unions are supposed to sit down and say now we have to improve the working conditions, the labour law has been put in place that regulates some of the issues that affect workers. How do you begin to strengthen the laws that were ..(unclear), instead when this element came strongly, of transforming state institutions, some have seen that I imagine myself becoming a senior manager. But at some point in time management have done that deliberately to weaken the strength of the unions because you will find that if you

interview some of the employees or management, taking key positions in certain companies, you will hear that they're coming from our ranks, the trade union ranks. But instead of unions to say how best can we benefit from you being on the other side of the table

Facilitator: You also mentioned that working conditions of the workers were terrible. In what sense were they terrible?

Respondent: You know for instance, hence I ..(unclear) 1,2, or 3, or two of the working conditions. There were no laws that regulated working conditions up until the unions, through COSATU fought for the law that will regulate. At that time an employer will say you can work even over 45 to 48 hours, so you have to change the situation, but in the Post Office it has assisted us through the association, after association we became a union, we had to change that – lunch was not recognised, you worked like a slave .., you can't take lunch if you are instructed so because management at that time was dictating to the workers, if you approach them they will say you can take your jacket and leave, as you have mentioned the maternity leave.

Facilitator: ja, so it was very tough. Were you guys affected by the Sunset Clause in 1994?

Respondent: as a union

Facilitator: ja, as a union, just black workers whereas the workers?

Respondent: no not really

Facilitator: the working conditions at the moment for the workers how would you define them?

Respondent: I must be honest they have improved drastically, people are now treated with respect, integrity, and the dignity that they deserve. But there is still that mindset, few of management, that mindset is still there, of the old order you know, but I would say the majority, because if one can sketch the scenario, I remember when I was leading the team for integration, remember we were in homelands, like Ciskei, Bophuthatswana, Venda, so we had to be integrated to the Post Office in 1996, 1994/95, I had to lead a delegation of Ciskei to a meeting with the minister. I remember at that time Pallo Jordan was the Minister of Post and Telecommunications. You will find that a delegation from management that Pallo was leading was only white people. Now there's change in the colour in terms of management. But instead of things to change, the struggle is so painful

Facilitator: so in the last few years what has been the problems experienced by the workers union?

Respondent: honestly speaking, from Poto/Poxo, we were very strong but the birth of ..(unclear), when we were merging with the other two or three associations, things are not operating, even members on the ground were saying .CW is not stronger than Poto/Poxo, CW is weak, CW is not addressing the issues of the workers. Because remember at that time of Poto/Poxo, both politically and labour movement there was only one objective, is to defeat the enemy, to defeat them with justice. Then now you operate within some Acts for instance, basically from the Labour Relations Act for instance, at that time when we decide to strike, we

would strike and we ..(unclear), but now if you want to strike your strike has to be protected, if it's unprotected then you will face the consequences. So workers they don't balance the pre-element for ..(unclear), because you have to operate within the parameters of those pieces of legislations.

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

Respondent: Well personally I could say where I am today, I think the union has invested in me, and I won't say the sad part, being a true leader where you normally want to address .., put worker issues first you know. You know next year 2nd of January I will be 30 years old with the Post Office, but when I look at some of the comrades within this period, they have just jumped the ..(unclear) I'm still at that level. I am not worried about that but I think its time to retire and look after myself and then leave this legacy to the coming leaders. I don't regret it and also the part of the family, I neglected the family for quite a long time, based on this full time shop steward job, because I have to go around the whole Eastern Cape, I have to attend meetings in Pretoria, Johannesburg and other provinces. You will find that within a month we are only two days at home. Even my kids, some of them at the age of .., growing up, I can't even tell you .., my wife was alone, but I don't complain. I am saying the struggle must continue. It was worth it

Facilitator: any closing word maybe?

Respondent: Closing words for instance, I'm asking myself, to whom are we going to leave this legacy especially for the ..(unclear), we know that there were challenges, I had to ask, what we are going to do is to build a

second layer ..(unclear) then when we retire, you see, ..(unclear) the challenge, we want to retire, and leave the legacy but the question that I'm asking is to whom are we going to leave the legacy. I think the approach of the union have taken another form now. There's a lot of elements within ourselves as leaders, hence that trust relationship between us and the workers is no longer there. If you open up the email, workers are hitting at us, especially bargaining issues, saying to yourselves you are sell outs, you are given monies, all sorts of stories, ..(unclear) instead of raising those issues in structural meetings. What worries most, at the time of retirement, there's an emerging union within CCW, that worries me. I thought I leave this legacy in good hands, but I'm saying to those workers currently the struggle must continue. I'm proud to be part of this labour movement for all these years, I don't regret, even the ANC I've seen that ..(unclear), currently I'm a part time councillor at Amatola District, as a PRO.

Facilitator: ja, very busy

Respondent: and I want to thank you for giving me this opportunity. Unions for instance should actually .., you know booklets, distribute for the coming generations, that's where we are failing even the labour movement. I really appreciate what has been done by Tata Mandela you know, talk about himself. So if this kind of interview for instance, you know could be collected and become a booklet you know, or a book, where history of the unions will be reflected. Currently you will find that in all these union offices, you will find pictures of the previous leaders, there's no history about that particular .., I think ..(unclear) champion that.

Facilitator: ja, thank you very much for your time.

END

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