

Phimelele Loro

Facilitator: This interview is done with Phimelele Loro, we are in Uitenhage, the date is the 28th March 2011 and the interview is done by Brown Maaba. Thank you for your time, can you just give us the background of where you were born, where you grew up and the nature of the family where you were born.

Respondent: Ok, can I speak English, Xhosa?

Facilitator: I was born in a place called Kerkwood, my parents were very religious. What happened is that we moved from Kerkwood to an area called Rafu, that is where I went to school. I went to school there up to JC at the time, I then moved to Uitenhage where carried on with my studies up to Grade 12 in today's terms. In 1973 I started working at a company called Veldspan, it was a textile company producing cloths. I worked there for about twelve years. Whilst we were working at Veldspan we tried to organise a trade union because at that time the conditions we were working under were unacceptable, workers were oppressed. It was also the time of apartheid. We organised a trade union but it was not easy, because we were not only facing our employers but were also facing the system. During the time we were trying to organise the trade union, the people who helped us to organise the union in the textile companies was the motor industry union called NAWU at the time. The people who assisted us were John Gomomo and Freddy Sols, these are the people who helped us to organise this union. After we received majority they gave us over to the NTWU at the time. At that time I was not a shopsteward, people who were shopsteward were Dora Langbooi and Kuksie up to 1982 where we went to a strike. We were on strike because of wages and other conditions of employment and the people who led us were Dora Langbooi and others. The company dismissed all workers. When we

went back to work Dora and other didn't come back because the company didn't want to accept them back. I went back in December 1982. Then January 1983 I was elected as a shopsteward. It myself and Mrs Mgogo with other guys as well who were elected as shopstewards. The reason we were able to return to work, the NTWU was trying to put pressure in the company in every way possible. We were helped by the students from Wits University in order for the company to given in and take back workers. They had a person who lectured there who was one of the directors, his name was Roshol, he was a shareholder in the (not clear) textile company, they put pressure on him saying to him he usually tells them that their company is the only company which deals on a fair basis with workers, then what about Veldspan in Uitenhage. On that basis we were able to go back to work. Let me rest now and not talk alone.

Facilitator: You mentioned that your family lived in Kerkwood, why did you move, what happened?

Respondent: When we left Kerkwood we moved to Rafu.

Facilitator: Why did you move, was there a specific reason?

Respondent: No, it was just my father who wanted to move that side.

Facilitator: Was it because of job opportunities?

Respondent: Not to say he moved because of job opportunities, what happened was that he worked in a farm, the farmer he worked for moved to Rafu, so he also decided to move.

Facilitator: How was farm life, was it difficult, tough, ok?

Respondent: Life in the farm was not a good life, it was a difficult life, it was difficult in a sense that the farmer didn't want you to further your education, his rule was that you can only be educated up to standard six and then after that you have to come back to work at the farm. It was on that basis that I decided to move to Uitenhage so that I can further my education and even look for work.

Facilitator: After you finished matric, didn't you think about going to University.

Respondent: No, because of the circumstances at home, I was not in a position to go to university, which is why I went to look for work and found a job in Veldspan.

Facilitator: As a worker, your impression when you started at Veldspan, what was it like working for the first time.

Respondent: When I started at Veldspan, the first day I was sent to oil machines, I did that job for a few years. I was interested in how they made the cloths, that is when I became a weaver. From there I was interested in how they checked for faults in the cloths, then I became a checker, I was a checker up until 1982.

When we went back to the factory after the strike in 1982 I became a senior shopsteward.

Facilitator: You mentioned that the conditions were not good at the factory and that led to the strike at some point in time.

Respondent: The wages workers received was very low and the way the workers worked in shifts. There were rotating shifts, and there were

people who were scheduled to work on Saturdays and they did not want to pay workers on the basis of time and a half for Saturdays, they said it was a normal day, they were just filling up their week. This is one of the issues that we were fighting for during that strike, we also wanted an increase, we wanted the company to allow unions to operate from the inside, there were also other conditions of employment like maternity leave. Workers had no rights, the company was doing as they pleased, during that time if you were in trouble, you didn't have a chance to get a fair hearing.

Facilitator: During that strike did you win on these things, or you lost some and won some?

Respondent: We won on some of the things although if you look at the strike on a broad basis, we lost on the basis of that not everybody was able to go back to work. The company with the police and government managed to take the strike apart because while we were on strike they tried to entice some of the workers to go back to work. We won some and lost some.

Facilitator: You also had some issues regarding women, things like maternity leave, were those things dealt with successfully.

Respondent: Yes, because before we had a trade union, all those things were not available to workers, but during the time we organised the trade union, we managed to achieve a lot of things for the workers, rights for the workers, things like paternity leave.

Facilitator: You also said the union was introduced in the early 1970s at the factory. Who came with this idea and did the workers receive it well or were there problems?

Respondent: As I've said, the people who came with the idea of the union were people like Gomomo who worked and VW, they came together with some workers, it was not everyone but sort of a committee, this committee was supposed to be the one that would be organising inside Veldspan, we received assistance from them. I was one of those people who were in that committee which tried to organise the union, as I've said before the people who helped us was the union in VW called NAWU.

Facilitator: Did the workers receive the idea of a union well?

Respondent: Yes they received it very well because of the conditions they were working under. Others were still afraid to join though, during that time people were afraid of being fired. If you remember that time black workers were not allowed to join unions.

Facilitator: How did the employers feel about the unions?

Respondent: They didn't like it at all, they tried by all means to crush it, but because of the power and unity of the workers they couldn't.

Facilitator: In terms of the wages, involved in the first strike where people were dismissed, were there differences between whites and blacks in terms of wages.

Respondent: There were differences; the whites received higher wages than black workers, so the gap was big in terms of wages between whites and blacks. It was one of the demands FOSATU had, that they should close this gap between workers.

Facilitator: Was the gap closed?

Respondent: No, we have not achieved that, even now there is still the gap, especially white collar workers. It is still there between whites, coloureds and blacks.

Facilitator: So you mean coloureds get better pay,

Respondent: Yes they get better pay than us black people.

Facilitator: So didn't those things create tensions at the workplace.

Respondent: They did, but from our side as a trade union we would have a way of fighting them, also pulling in coloured workers trying to show them that its not because management loved them when they gave them better wages, they were also in the same boat with the black workers because we were receiving the same treatment with them, it was just the money that was different so that they can think that they are better than us black people and don't need to join a trade union, so they must always be on the side of management.

Facilitator: Were you able to convince the coloured workers?

Respondent: They finally understood our point, because they were also part and parcel of the union, they joined the union in numbers. So on that basis the management couldn't stop of from organising the trade union. We were not allowed to organise the trade union openly but I can say we worked underground. The employer would just receive a letter from a union outside requesting a meeting with them because the union has a majority of the company's workers. So the letter would be requesting a meeting to discuss the rights of the workers.

Facilitator: You became a shopsteward in 1983, why you or what was the way forward.

Respondent: Veldspan was a big company, it employed some one thousand and odd workers, we had different departments in the company. So I was chosen to lead my department, since I was one of the people that were involved in organising, and I was challenging the company regarding things that were happening that were not right. I was elected as one of the shopstewards at Veldspan on that basis. After I was elected as shopsteward, I then became the chairperson of the branch and then the chairperson of the region for SACTU. We used to be called NUTW and we decided that we should form unions of the basis of one union one industry, one federation one country. So we decided that all the unions in the sector of textile industry must come together and form one union. I was also part and parcel of the people who were trying to establish that union. At first NUTW merged with GAWU, which was a big union which was based in Cape Town and Durban, they were in the garment industry. So these two unions merged to form SACTU. Then I was then elected to be the chairperson of this region of the Eastern Cape for SACTU. As from 1982 up until 2003. In 1995 Veldspan closed down. From there I went to work for another textile company called Union Spinning Mills. When I arrived there I worked as a person who oiled machines, but I also ended up being a full time shopsteward there as well. It was a big company and had two plants, they had about two thousand employees. There was a main plant and the cotton plant, I was in the cotton plant. The cotton closed down in 2003.

Facilitator: Going back to your first job in 1983, you came in as a shopsteward, what were the challenges on the ground.

Respondent: The challenges we faced, firstly it was to drive and unite workers so that we can have a strong union. The other challenges I faced was to handle cases, if a worker has done something wrong so we would try and defend them. Also as a leader you had a challenge of always giving direction to the workers and whenever the union takes a decision you make sure that you come back and report to the workers so that they are informed about things happening in their union.

Facilitator: You also became a branch secretary for SACTU, I don't know whether you held all these positions, shopsteward, chairperson, and regional chairperson or you had to dump some in between.

Respondent: What happens is that firstly you become a shopsteward at the factory, from the factory you have a shopsteward council, where all the different companies come together and then elect their office bearers. That is where I went to become the branch chairperson, I can't remember how long I was a branch chairperson. After that the regional congress is called where the whole Eastern Cape comes together and elects regional office bearers amongst you. That is where I was elected again as a regional chairperson, so I had to give up the branch chairperson position.

Facilitator: So as a shopsteward what were the burning issues that needed to be dealt with at that time.

Respondent: The burning issues that we handled during that time were cases handling, where you also had meetings with management. We would have meetings with workers and then take their demands to management, then try to negotiate the workers' demands with management. It was not nice to be a shopsteward during that time, it

was that time where apartheid was at its peak. As shopsteward we were always under threat because we were seen as part and parcel of these organisations that were against government. We were also members of the community and with what was going on there in terms of politics, we were also affected. We separated issues of the community and worker issues, workers dealt with their own issues and took their own decisions, they were not influenced by political parties. It is different now because if you look at COSATU, there is that alliance with SACP and ANC. During FOSATU era we were dealing mainly with workers issues.

Facilitator: As you said, if you were in the union you could be seen as someone involved in the struggle, how did that affect the family.

Respondent: Luckily for me my family didn't have a problem with me for being involved with the union and for being involved with the struggle, my wife understood, wherever I would go to attend meetings she was understanding that it's something I have to do.

Facilitator: Was there a relationship between the worker's struggle and the struggle in the township. KwaNobuhle is know for the activities in the 1980s.

Respondent: Obviously there was a relationship because while you are working there, you are still a member of the community in the township, whatever problems the community is experiencing you are a part of that, therefore you couldn't just fold your arms when people are fighting and others dying. We were able to participate in community struggle after we come back from work, although I was not in the forefront here in the community.

Facilitator: Things like stayaways and so forth.

Respondent: We would take part in those.

Facilitator: Did the community support you, or was it just the workers doing their own thing.

Respondent: When there was a stayaway, obviously workers and the community supported it, we would be united.

Facilitator: You were there for a long time in the firm you worked in, did conditions change overtime or were they just getting worse.

Respondent: Are you talking about trying to change things in the workplace for workers.

Facilitator: Yes

Respondent: I would say there's a lot we achieved in terms of worker's rights by the unions. If we look at it politically, although we have achieved independence politically, if you look at the workers, they are still not free because the economy is still in the hands of a few people.

Facilitator: Just to go back, you also became a branch chairperson, the challenges of having to run a branch, what were they?

Respondent: There were a lot of challenges; one was to try and keep your branch united and also to see that workers in the branch are getting service from the organisers. Even as chairperson, your duty is to go factory by factory and get complaints from workers from all the workers in your branch. You would find that organiser sometimes don't

go to certain factories, especially if they know that in a certain factory workers are very militant, so they would just tell themselves that they will not go to that particular factory because they are afraid. My job would be to make sure that the people in the office must do their jobs, not to come and sit in the office but go out to the factories and recruit workers and serve our members.

Facilitator: So looking back at when you were a shopsteward, do you think there were major achievements at that time and what were the downfalls of being a shopsteward or because of things that were never achieved.

Respondent: I would say there are things that we achieved, if I understand your question correctly. There are things that we achieved as shopstewards or as a trade union. There are things that we still haven't achieved even today, the trade union still has to fight to get to those things, there's a lot. I would say if you look at worker's rights in South Africa, which they have now in the constitution or the Labour relations Act. There is a law which governs and protects the rights of workers, is one of the things that is achieved by trade unions, it's through the struggle of the workers. It's up to the workers to make sure that these rights are not taken away again. There is a lot of outcry from the investors because they say they cannot come and invest in South Africa because our labour laws favour the workers. Now if they were to remove some of the laws in the LRA, it would be up to COSATU to make sure that on the things we achieved they don't give them away.

Facilitator: When you look back would you say that when you were a shopsteward there are things that you never achieve or things that you think they should have been done in this way and not that way.

Respondent: No I am stuck, I am not sure.

Facilitator: You also mentioned that you were to be the regional chair for SACTU, I am sure the roles are different as compared to the roles of Branch Chairperson and the role of being a shopsteward. The challenges of being a Chairperson of region as a whole, what were you faced with.

Respondent: There was not much of a difference because what you did at branch level is the same as what you did at regional level. It was just to make sure that your region ran smoothly. Also check on your organisers, the only difference would be now you are looking at the whole of the Eastern Cape, from PE up until the end of Transkei. There are more responsibilities than at branch level.

Facilitator: Over time, was SACTU increasing or decreasing as years went by?

Respondent: SACTU was growing a lot because it was one of the biggest trade unions in COSATU. They were not the biggest one but were among the ones that were the biggest in COSATU federation. Through factory closures, retrenchments, all those things I was telling you about that Veldspan, (not clear) and other companies closed down completely. So now obviously membership declined. Imports from the black market from China made things worse as well, I remember SACTU used to go to the Durban docks to protest about these things coming though sea in containers illegally. In these containers you would find that they say they are bringing in clothing, but find that underneath there's a car, there was a lot of stuff that was illegally brought to the country. We were trying to put pressure on

government to make sure that they check things that come in containers into the country.

Facilitator: Do you think they did all that?

Respondent: Yes they did, although they didn't do enough, there were people who were arrested for bringing in illegal good into South Africa. Even now you find that there is a lot of things from China, they store these things in storage and then take them out at a later stage. One thing we protested for, if you look in the streets in PE, I am not sure maybe you find the same thing in Johannesburg and Pretoria, you find people selling these things in the streets, its one the things that killed jobs in South Africa because Chinese things come into South Africa very cheap because in China they used cheap labour, kids, they don't pay their workers, now its easy for them to come and sell whatever in South Africa and in the process kill our economy and produce.

Facilitator: What is the future of SACTU under these circumstances whereby membership is going down instead of up because of the issues you have raised?

Respondent: In my view I don't see SACTU, I don't see a future in textile companies, unless SACTU would change their scope and not only organise in the textile sector but organise in other sectors as well. SACTU organises in shoe, textile and leather companies. Unless they change their scope and organise in other sectors, I don't see a future in textile.

Facilitator: Just to go back, SACTU was part of FOSATU, am I right, before COSATU started. What were the advantages of being affiliated under FOSATU as SACTU.

Respondent: There advantages, as I have said, whenever we had a strike as SACTU, it would be to our advantage if the federation worked with us on that particular strike and take over and handle your strike, that was powerful, not only to your employer but to government and other companies. For example, if Veldspan buys whatever from VW, or if Veldspan sells its products to General tyre, so if FOSATU comes in as a federation, for example NUMSA operates in General Tyre and they are also affiliated to FOSATU. At VW, SEPAWU operates there and they are affiliated to FOSATU. Now we had a principle that said, injury to one is an injury to all, so workers who were on strike would get support from other workers in other sectors, that made in our strike easy to achieve our demands because of the support given by the federation. So I think it is an advantage for a union to belong to a federation.

Facilitator: At the time you were still in Veldspan, were there other independent unions inside Veldspan or there was only one union.

Respondent: There was a union which operated, it was used by the company to try and break NUTW at the time, and try to block NUTW from growing. Now this union that operated there was a sweetheart union, although it was there, it didn't do anything for the workers, it was on that basis that workers looked around for another union to represent them. When we were on strike the company was using the very same union to try and break the strike, where they recruited people to go back to work by threatening that they were going to lose their jobs for supporting our union and the strike. Some of the workers went back to work because they were afraid of losing their jobs, but some of them stood firm because they wanted to achieve something. As time went we managed to oust this union as NUTW became the majority, then it was us who had a bigger voice inside the company, although they still had members who belonged to them but were very few.

Facilitator: Were there opportunities of receiving training, you were a shopsteward, then went on to branch and regional level. Were there short courses that could help you to run this particular union.

Respondent: Yes, there was always training available, the union trained all shopstewards. They give them shopstewards training, train them on Labour Relations Act, and any other training so that shopstewards can be able to handle cases, grievances and be able to negotiate with employers inside the company.

Facilitator: SACTU is more dominated by women, there are more women employed than men in this sector than any other sector, I might be wrong about this, but it seems to be it was still led by men than women.

Respondent: Jokingly, it's the same of what is happening in the ANC, the majority of members is women but the majority of leaders are men. Let me come back to your question and leave jokes behind. The majority of members of SACTU are females, but at the same time although they are majority, when elections come, the very same females elect men to take the key positions, although there are some women who take some positions. For instance the treasurer for SACTU was a female, the vice president was female, her name was Violet Siboni from Johannesburg. They were not ready to take the president position.

Facilitator: Looking back at the women that took certain positions, as you said, do you there they were outstanding, powerful or you were just filling up the space.

Respondent: I would say they deserved the position, because if you take Violet Lebona who was president, she was strong, so they deserved those positions.

Facilitator: Also as a shopsteward, you were a shopsteward in your old firm where you work and later on as well, were there instances where the employers wanted to victimise you because they felt you were the one misleading the workers.

Respondent: There were some times where the company would take those chances, where they would look for anything that they can hold on to and try to nail you with it, but as shopstewards we knew that the company would try to find something on you because on this. So I was always careful and made sure I do things right. So when I did something, like challenging the company, foreman or manager I always made sure that I was on the right path so I don't give them that room for them to nail me. If they took that chance, the union would step in and at the end they would fail and not prove anything.

Facilitator: When 1990 came, the release of Mandela and other political prisoners, did that have an impact on unions or how did unions benefit post 1990.

Respondent: As I've said, and it's my personal view, the unions have not yet benefited anything, because as I've said before, South Africans are politically free, but workers in South Africa are not free yet.

Facilitator: What needs to be done to liberate workers?

Respondent: The only thing needed is that labour must take control of the economy of South Africa. For example, unions and workers must

take key positions in companies. I would say there are five people that control the economy of South Africa, now these five people, if they can be removed, if the economy of South Africa can be in the hands of all workers instead of a few people. There are these big guns that control the economy, Barlow (not clear) is one of them, I have forgotten the other names of the other companies.

Facilitator: You said Veldspan closed in 1995, this company that you moved to.

Respondent: Union Spinning Mills.

Facilitator: Right, you were also elected as a shopsteward, was there no shopsteward before.

Respondent: I am not sure what happened there, when I arrived there workers wanted me as a shopsteward, maybe they saw me speaking in their meetings as a worker.

Facilitator: Was that environment different from Veldspan in terms of union leadership.

Respondent: It was because when I arrived there, I changed everything and gave direction to shopstewards. When I arrived there the shopstewards were not active, they were just there in name only, they didn't play the role of being a shopsteward. So when I arrived I changed everything. There were thirty two shopstewards and I was the last one, but in that thirty two when I arrived there we managed to change a lot of things.

Facilitator: Can you give me an example.

Respondent: For example, the relationship between the employer and employee and the way departments inside related to each other, starting from management to employees. Although SACTU operated there as well, but things that they achieved were not a lot, now when I arrived there we achieved a lot of things that were worker's rights.

Facilitator: So you were there for how long?

Respondent: I started in 1996 until 2003.

Facilitator: Then after that?

Respondent: After that I didn't work. I started in this place I am in now in 2008.

Facilitator: Is it a different environment?

Respondent: Completely different. In some cases where I am now, I find myself advising (not clear) I press on him if I see that he is not saying the right thing, although I am not supposed to do that, because I am there just to interpret, (not clear) he will tell me that I don't have a right to do that, I am there just to interpret. Fortunately I didn't hide from them that I came from a trade union background, so they told me that I should understand that this is not the union, I am only there to interpret, I am not there to represent workers, that is why I say sometimes I find myself lost because I am in an unfamiliar environment. Work is scarce, so we just try to find something we can do to survive.

Facilitator: You also mentioned earlier when we were coming here by car that unions today are no longer the same, they are just too big.

Respondent: If you look now, unions are not there to serve the interest of the workers anymore, I am referring to the union officials. Union officials will all of them, or 80% of them, from all unions, what they are interested in is the stepladder to government. If a person can get a stepladder to government, they are less interested about other things. The service workers used to get before is not the same as today. I am not saying that is wrong, but now, even Vavi, is more directly dealing with political issues, leaving basic issues of the workers. They have shifted away from issues of workers and they are focussing mainly on political issues, which is why I am saying unions are not working the same as before. The purpose why the unions were formed is no more there.

Facilitator: Do you think the purpose could change in the future?

Respondent: No

Facilitator: It's not likely?

Respondent: The only thing I see is that, instead of them growing, they are dying. The only thing you see now most workers, like in a political party, everybody is fed up, for example in the ANC, they are not delivering. Although people are fed up with the ANC, they don't have an alternative home. If there can be an alternative home established, other people who go to it. It must not someone coming from inside the ANC but someone from the floor. The same thing is happening from the factories with unions, workers are fed up of their own unions because they say their unions are doing nothing for them, but if a messiah can come, even here in VW. People came up with OGAWU where that one thousand a something workers were dismissed, that was a wrong decision, they didn't come with an intention of being an

alternative for NUMSA as a union, but they had their own motives. That is why I am saying even here in SA, here in COSATU, if there could be an alternative federation, the only problem is, there is a federation that exists, NACTU, but its quiet, it is not visible and not militant.

Facilitator: Is there something else which you think should be part of this interview.

Respondent: Not that I can think of, maybe if you have something from your side.

Facilitator: Was it worth it to be part of unions or do you regret it.

Respondent: It was worth it.

Facilitator: Any closing words maybe.

Respondent: No I don't have anything.

Facilitator: Thanks very much for your time. Thank you very much.

Respondent: Ok.

END

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