

Anastasia Mbolekwa

Facilitator: This is an interview with Anastasia Mbolekwa, we are at Potchefstroom, Ikageng Township, the date is 22 January 2012, interview is done by Brown Maaba. Thanks very much for your time. Please give me a background as to where you were born, how you were raised, your schooling and how you ended up in union structures?

Respondent: I was born in Ikageng, Potchefstroom on 3 January 1971.

Facilitator: What about your schooling, did you come from a rich or poor family?

Respondent: No I'm not from a rich family, my father died when 10 and still at primary school, I was brought up by a single parent

Facilitator: How was it, did she manage?

Respondent: Yes she managed, she did her best, she didn't want us to feel that we are brought up by a single parent, she made sure that everything was normal

Facilitator: were you the only child in the family?

Respondent: no we are 4 and I'm the last one.

Facilitator: So all of you did well?

Respondent: Yes we did well because she educated us all, maybe I'm unfortunate but one of us succeeded and became a teacher at a high school, I'm a care giver now because I didn't know which career to follow. I studied at Potch Tech and did the secretarial courses, whilst studying I got married in 1998 and stopped studying, this is where I went wrong. I then opted for the care giving course.

Facilitator: Where did you study?

Respondent: Potchefstroom, the course was ran by Dr Kaal. At the same time I studied for Business Management at Mokatsane Centre. I was in the top 10, my husband didn't want me to continue, he became jealous so I continued with care giving.

Facilitator: Okay, so you are still busy with care giving?

Respondent: Yes and then I worked at Multi Care for a couple of weeks, I then gave birth to my second child after a couple of weeks, in 2003 I gave birth to my third child. I was then employed at Medi Clinic, moonlighting as a care giver. After that I didn't have a job anymore, I was then employed by an old age home in 2005.

Facilitator: Are you still working for the old age?

Respondent: Yes, Huis Anna Viljoen Old Age Home

Facilitator: Give me a sense of the township when you grew up here, the nature of the township, politically, socially, otherwise, in the 1980s it was just blacks and whites?

Respondent: Yes it was black and white but I went to primary in the township, I later went to a boarding school, Bodenstein, which was for blacks only, although we were taught by whites.

Facilitator: Why boarding school and why not here?

Respondent: That's the way my mum wanted to bring us up

Facilitator: So you all went to boarding school?

Respondent: Yes all of us, the four of us

Facilitator: But you returned here?

Respondent: Yes I did after completing my Matric

Facilitator: So in other words you were never part and parcel or did you miss the show of the 1980s, the fights with the boers etc?

Respondent: No I experienced those while I was still at primary level, during riots

Facilitator: You said you got involved in ANC activities at some point but you stopped?

Respondent: Yes

Facilitator: When was that and ..?

Respondent: In 2000 when I moved to this area, I joined the ANC

Facilitator: Why did you stop?

Respondent: I didn't stop, I joined and afterwards new people are recruited and you are left behind, I renew my membership regularly

Facilitator: Tell me about unions, how did you end up in union structures?

Respondent: I became involved in unions in 2009, I was working at the time

Facilitator: At the old age home?

Respondent: Yes

Facilitator: When was the union introduced at the old age?

Respondent: It was there when I joined, the place is controlled by whites and there's a lot of discrimination, it falls under SAVF (South Africa Vrou Federasie)

Facilitator: So in other words it is directed by white women?

Respondent: Yes

Facilitator: Tell me about the place, how is it, what do you deal with and what the dynamics and problems you are faced with?

Respondent: It's an old age home for white people, the new management requested that black people be appointed they did but whites are still in the majority. I was told that they used to work under a lot of pressure, the union assisted them a lot. There was a lot of oppression. To date we are still under pressure.

Facilitator: How were they suffering?

Respondent: The salaries are low and shortage of staff, they keep on saying "you must work, we are paying you with our money" – this is from the residents and most of them are rich people.

Facilitator: What is the name of the union?

Respondent: NEHAWU

Facilitator: So you joined in 2009 and immediately joined the union?

Respondent: No at the time I was not working ..?

Facilitator: Okay but when did you start working at SAVF?

Respondent: 2005 I started working there, I joined the union in 2006

Facilitator: What was your impression of the place when you arrived here?

Respondent: I came here because I needed a job after my husband died, he died in 2005 so I had no choice I had to look for a job.

Facilitator: What about the workers, how did they communicate with management through the union?

Respondent: The management does not take the union into consideration. We are forcing them to recognise us, but generally the union is not taken seriously

Facilitator: Don't you have power, as far as I know NEHAWU is strong?

Respondent: Yes I had to do something about it, our chairperson died last year and we have a new chairperson, he is not yet brave, I have to push most of the things, but management is still stubborn.

Facilitator: What are the shop floor issues that you are dealing with?

Respondent: We do not have access to management, I wrote them a letter after our general meeting and requested management to start taking shop stewards into consideration because for instance when they are conducting interviews they do not involve the union. They do not advertise internally, they just appoint. So when I insist that they should invite me they say it's not a political interview. Management operates on its own without

Facilitator: Did you not report them?

Respondent: I reported them

Facilitator: Any reaction or action from the union?

Respondent: It seems something it is going to be done soon. This year they conducted surveys, they were trying to get our opinions on how we feel about what's happened in the previous years. I told them that I noticed that a lot of people seem to be dying this year because of the Leap Year, and that we need to be ready. I also told them that they keep telling us that they do not have funds but they are busy renovating the hospital without informing. We were also informed that there will be retrenchments, two people have been retrenched already. I also asked them how come we do not fall under government, under SAVF, they are refusing. At the moment the organisation is ran by men, most of the females have died. The person who was doing the survey told me that I shouldn't say the company is rich. She told me the history of the hospital, how it was found by women, they used to sell pancakes etc., that they got most of their funding from churches. The home was originally for the aged and orphans. When I came there were no orphans, they realised after a while that rich people want to use the home for themselves. So the residents is mostly rich people. I told her that the funny part is Lotto funds a lot of things, and that I am surprised that Lotto is funding the aged even though they are getting a government subsidy every year in April. She became angry with me and told me that we are not talking politics, and that this has nothing to do with politics. I then told her that it's not politics, it's my understanding of the situation. She told me that Lotto is no longer sponsoring the aged and that pensioners are no longer getting a government subsidy. Government is forced to fund equally for both blacks and whites, because there are no black people they are no longer funding them. Apparently the nursing department has a shortage of

black people because most blacks are now educated whereas whites are not educated. In my opinion this is favouritism, if you are known you are given auxiliary and immediately registered with the Nursing Council. She was amazed.

Facilitator: So what is going to happen eventually?

Respondent: I don't know maybe people will be retrenched, we do not know what is their aim. They are busy building expensive flats, so some people may not afford it, the price of the flats and the rental is quite high. I presume they will retrench some of the nursing staff. They have very few cleaners.

Facilitator: Is NEHAWU the only union?

Respondent: Hospesa also but mostly are affiliated to NEHAWU.

Facilitator: Who is Hospesa?

Respondent: It's for the white people

Facilitator: So it is only for whites?

Respondent: Yes but sometimes when they employ you and you have no idea you will be asked to join it but as time goes on you will realise that NEHAWU is for blacks and Hospesa is for whites. Some of the people who were retrenched used to belong to the union and were only retrenched after they left the union. They were retrenched because they were no

longer affiliated to the union. I tried to help them but the union officials told me that they cannot be represented because they are not members.

Facilitator: How as Hospesa?

Respondent: Empty promises

Facilitator: So did some of the employees leave Hospesa and joined NEHAWU?

Respondent: Yes most of the workers are affiliated to NEHAWU

Facilitator: So do you think Hospesa will die?

Respondent: It is dead already, they do not have members anymore, we were given their diaries.

Facilitator: This retirement/old age home is it for whites only?

Respondent: There are a few blacks but are very few, about 3 out of about 90 something, others die and new ones come in

Facilitator: So do you think they are trying to control the black numbers?

Respondent: No – black people cannot afford most black people are from poor backgrounds, the people do not have anyone to look after them

Facilitator: So money talks there?

Respondent: Yes. I was told that the family pays an extra amount on top of the pension money that they are getting. So most of the black people are lost with no families, the focus is on the pension money.

Facilitator: What about wage issues, are those the issues that create conflict in the workplace or ..? Are you okay with the wages?

Respondent: No I am not okay, I am constantly fighting them. The salaries are low, for 6 years I'm being paid R1900, I am not happy with the salary

Facilitator: Did you raise it with them?

Respondent: I am constantly raising it. Our senior sister tells us that other people who are not employed will be happy to be paid the salary we are being paid. When I tell her that the place is making money because they are doing renovations etc., they do not even have discussions with the shop stewards, we have to accept anything that comes my way. I am always confronting them that we are working hard and being paid very little, we just go to work because we have no other alternative. The shop steward is under pressure, I'm now in the new year and do not qualify for leave. They do not like confrontations but I know that I am working under pressure. Head office also knows how I feel about their salaries. In some cases our very own black brothers/sisters are working with the whites which is very disheartening.

Facilitator: What were the difficult cases that you dealt with, dismissals or any other cases?

Respondent: I dealt with one case .., the employee did not give me information on time, I tried to help, I tried my best. The lady was treating her husband badly at home, he also brought some of the stuff that she had stolen, she also forged the care giver certificate. Head Office investigated the matter and brought the original certificate which stated that she had failed. I had tried to save her but there was enough evidence against her. She lost the case because of theft, which is a dismissable offence, including the fraudulent certificate

Facilitator: So she was fired?

Respondent: Yes they fired her and paid her benefits.

Facilitator: Any other difficult cases?

Respondent: No

Facilitator: Are the workers relaxed or have they left everything on your shoulders or are they co-operative with you?

Respondent: No they are not co-operative

Facilitator: So whether you win or not ..

Respondent: When they are frustrated they appreciate me but if they are okay they don't care – they are easily bribed, the rich white residents bribes them with their old furniture, in most cases they sell their furniture to the cleaners, the cleaners are very supportive to the whites. For instance at the end of the month they raise funds by selling these things and the

money remains with the old age home. So if you try to advise them they get angry, but when they have problems they come to the union for help.

Facilitator: What about strikes, have you had any?

Respondent: Never, they are working, they are being threatened and are afraid to take leave without pay

Facilitator: So the last national NEHAWU strike were you guys working?

Respondent: I was off

Facilitator: What about others?

Respondent: They went to work

Facilitator: Why?

Respondent: They are afraid to go on strike

Facilitator: You arrived here in 2005, and then in 2006 you were appointed as the shop steward?

Respondent: No 2009

Facilitator: Before you were elected as the shop steward who was the shop steward?

Respondent: It was Tshidi Rampai, she died last year.

Facilitator: How did she cope?

Respondent: I believe at the beginning she was quite strong, she was able to achieve quite a lot without the support, she was fighting alone with no support, she had a lot of challenges and things were difficult for her. The other one was Stompie who left because she realised that there won't be changes. She then resigned.

Facilitator: How were you elected?

Respondent: They told me that I deserve to be elected because I've always fought for my rights

Facilitator: You were vocal?

Respondent: Yes I fight for my rights, I am not afraid of white people, I face them and don't care how they feel? I go straight to the point.

Facilitator: What about training as shop stewards, did you get any training?

Respondent: Yes we received training

Facilitator: What kind of training?

Respondent: How to deal with cases, that was the common one and parental care. Other training offered people are just not interested even if they are invited, they don't attend.

Facilitator: Do you not have a Shop Steward Councils here?

Respondent: Yes there is one

Facilitator: Do you belong to one?

Respondent: Yes

Facilitator: What are the general problems faced by other shop stewards here, as compared to your own problem for your own sector?

Respondent: Other sectors are very strong. Samuel Broadband, the shop stewards and members are very strong, the difference is visible compared to us. They sit around the table with management and negotiate on behalf of the workers.

Facilitator: So you guys haven't learnt anything from those people?

Respondent: I've learnt a lot

Facilitator: Like what?

Respondent: They are co-operative and they are also supportive, this is what I learnt from them – the comrades and shop stewards work hand in hand.

Facilitator: What is the future of NEHAWU at SAVF, where you are currently working, is it going to last?

Respondent: I am looking for a job I don't think I will last

Facilitator: What about job opportunities here in Potch?

Respondent: Favouritism

Facilitator: What do you mean?

Respondent: They use favouritism – I would have long got a job but jobs are given to people who are known to the employers

Facilitator: In what sense?

Respondent: People bring in the people that they know. For instance SAPS I volunteered and there were 5 positions and we were 5, for cleaning, they went and employed other 5 people from outside, obviously those were the people known to them. So there's a lot of favouritism.

Facilitator: What about health safety issues in the workplace, do you have such problems?

Respondent: There's no safety there

Facilitator: Do you need some safety of some sort?

Respondent: Yes we must be safe, safety clothes. The nursing department has been waiting for the uniform since last year, we were told

the uniform will be delivered on Tuesday. They also didn't buy us what we wanted, they organised uniforms with SAVF who made the wrong clothes

Facilitator: So you are just working without any form of safety?

Respondent: There's no safety

Facilitator: Did you raise this with the employer?

Respondent: We complained but there is no response. It is not safe for us because we have to assist sick patients, in some cases we do not know what is long with them, we do not have nose vacs, gloves we are just given one glove and this is cross infection especially when you work with sick people, up to five in a day, you have to bathe them. It is not safe for your health.

Facilitator: Salaries, safety issues – what are the other complaints, or is it just the two?

Respondent: There is no respect, the seniors do not respect juniors, they are boers, "*jy moet*" they do not have the correct manner of approach.

Facilitator: What about racism?

Respondent: There's a lot of racism, the residents tell us that if it they were not at the home we wouldn't be paid, they say this to us as we bathe them and give care to them. When we complain we are told that we should not take notice of them because they have Alzheimer. The residents are very rude.

Facilitator: What about management in terms of ..(unclear)

Respondent: Poor management, very poor. We are constantly fighting with them and telling them that they do not have management skills.

Facilitator: So does it mean they do not care?

Respondent: I don't know, they are earning good salaries and they have no problem, they feel they are deserving the good salaries. In general meetings there is never a conclusion, things are just the same. I had to fight for the general meeting, they were never held in the past. The nursing staff hold it's own meetings, cleaners hold their own and so does management, shop stewards are not invited, how are the workers going to know what is going on.

Facilitator: So the issues will never be resolved?

Respondent: I don't think so, things are going to get worse if they do not get subsidies anymore, things are going to get worse. This year things are worse.

Facilitator: Victimization at work because you are a shop steward, are you victimised?

Respondent: I am victimised, I am just stubborn, I am a victim but I am not afraid of them – I tell them all the time that we are all there to work, so we must work together, and we must respect each other.

Facilitator: You mentioned before the interview that the workers tend to sell you out and so on?

Respondent: No they are not selling me out

Facilitator: So what is their story?

Respondent: They are afraid to be vocal, they speak in the corridors not in front of the employer. In general meetings they don't say anything

Facilitator: So you do have staff meetings at work?

Respondent: Only after we complained to the union, they used to separate us, now we have general staff meetings. There was also a problem about leave days – some people get up to two months, I get 8 days a year because I'm a victim for the whole year. I asked for family responsibility and it was refused at the beginning of the year, I took it and took my child to school, I am a single parent and do not have a husband, it means I must fight again for leave.

Facilitator: So did they eventually grant the leave?

Respondent: Yes, I tell her and she will give me a form to complete. I don't come to work and will see her when I come back. They have changed me so much.

Facilitator: Are you saying you were different in the beginning?

Respondent: I don't know maybe I was a bit slow, since I joined the union I've changed, I do not fight unnecessarily. I do my work they cannot complain about my work. They make me work hard but if I did work hard I tell them I am not going to work. Sometimes I do work that is done by 3 people, so if I do not feel well I tell them I won't be coming.

Facilitator: The future of NEHAWU here in Potch? Do you think it will be bright or drop over some time?

Respondent: We are constantly told that Potch is too relaxed, so I don't know what will happen this year

Facilitator: Are they right?

Respondent: Yes, during the elections DA wanted to take Potch over?

Facilitator: They nearly did?

Respondent: Yes, DA was in Potch but NEHAWU and COSATU stood up and managed to stop them, ANC succeeded. We were told that shop stewards must take part in ANC activities and recruit people into Women's League, Youth League etc. We all want to but others are not interested.

Facilitator: Will ANC win the next election?

Respondent: Yes

Facilitator: Has the ANC won since 1994?

Respondent: Yes

Facilitator: Is it just now that the union is disturbed?

Respondent: Yes

Facilitator: So all along you've been under the ANC?

Respondent: Yes

Facilitator: Tell me about the workers, are you very active in community affairs as shop stewards?

Respondent: I keep telling them to be active in community affairs, but people are generally tired, they work hard, we are under staffed so it is not easy for them.

Facilitator: In your company do you have a lot of men/women?

Respondent: Some men, but the majority is women?

Facilitator: What's wrong with the men, why are they not getting involved?

Respondent: They are afraid, there's 2 shop stewards both women, SAVF also are 2, Huis Anna Viljoen and Ons Helder, there's 4 shop stewards

Facilitator: What about men?

Respondent: They are afraid

Facilitator: What about maternity benefits, are you okay?

Respondent: Yes we are fine, NEHAWU negotiated for the workers

Facilitator: What if you are not under NEHAWU and you are a woman at work, what do you do if you take maternity?

Respondent: Three months, with NEHAWU it's 6 months. The majority joined NEHAWU

Facilitator: So now whether or not you take 6 months maternity leave

Respondent: Yes

Facilitator: What other benefits do you have other than maternity leave?

Respondent: Like what?

Facilitator: Pension, bursaries etc., anything?

Respondent: Yes we do have pension, bursary is granted on favouritism, they are not transparent about it only a few know about it especially in the nursing field. We are always asking for bursaries and they are not granted. Their payslips are fraudulent, it doesn't help me anywhere. The workers agreed to this without understanding the dynamics.

Facilitator: It's difficult

Respondent: Yes

Facilitator: What are you going to do in the end?

Respondent: I am currently looking for a job, I'm a victim and feel victimised, we are working under tremendous pressure.

Facilitator: What about exploitation, or are you okay?

Respondent: It is not so visible but it is there, together with racism. We are not treated equally, whites have better benefits, some black people do have access others don't. We've discussed this with them but nothing seems to be coming right. The next thing we are waiting for is retrenchment?

Facilitator: Retrenchment, so are you going to leave?

Respondent: Yes let them retrench us so that we can decide what to do with the retrenchment packages, at least I've served for 7 years.

Facilitator: But generally are women in Potch participating in union activities, NEHAWU and other unions, are they active?

Respondent: Yes they are active

Facilitator: Is there anything that you think is important that we did not discuss?

Respondent: I think we discussed all the important thing. The ANC has promised us a lot and has not delivered. So I have no clue about what is going on in this area.

Facilitator: Do you regret why you became a shop steward?

Respondent: No regrets at all, I am hoping to get a job with NEHAWU. I learnt a lot from being a shop steward.

Facilitator: What are the best achievements in the last 5 years?

Respondent: The workers were in slavery and things are better now, irrespective of the bribes but their quality of life improved, they used to clean by kneeling on the floor, they no longer do this. Democracy does not allow this kind of thing.

Facilitator: Failures or difficulties?

Respondent: Empty promises, they are failing to respond to worker's issues.

Facilitator: Any closing word

Respondent: I don't have any, I'm waiting for Tuesday to find out what is going on.

Facilitator: Thanks for your time

Respondent: Thank you.

END

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