

QONDILE DUBE

Facilitator: This is an interview with Mrs. Qondile Dube, we are in Johannesburg, the date is the 19 July 2010 and the interview is done by Brown Maaba. Thanks very much for your time, you can talk in English, Zulu, Sotho or you can mix its fine. Could you just give me a background of where you were born, how your family was and how you eventually connected to the labour movement?

Respondent: I was born in 1958 in Soweto. When it comes to politics my father was the one who used to harbor Nelson Mandela and others in Balfour, Siyathemba. What happened most of the time, I used to go to school in Mndeni Senior secondary, in 1976 I was a student there. In 1976 was when I met Sydney Siyahlu and Innox Godongwana, they were my seniors but in Naledi High. We had a meeting around Soweto together with Tsietsi Mashinini, our main aim was the problem with Afrikaans as a medium of education, but it turned after we had started to speak about education, there were kids who got injured. The massacre happened in 1978 if not 1977 whereby Hani and others were attacked in Maseru, it was not specifically ANC or others but it was all Black Consciousness. What happened was that Patrice Nkonde and Vincent, I forgot the surname, also Shasha, they were the people who influenced us. In 1978, June 16, we were supposed to commemorate June 16 and that is when we heard that Hani and others had been attacked, by then Khehla Mthembu was president of AZAPO and were planning to have an AGM to elect new leadership, that's where everything started moving because when we were supposed to go for the commemoration, Khehla and others came and told us about people who were attacked in exile and we decided to move ahead in speeding up things from inside the country. The very

same day the people who were in the underground movement started distributing pamphlets which were talking about the Maseru Massacre. We had leadership at that time where people like Curtis Nkondo, who decided that the UDF must be formed, they were grooming us to go house to house and talk to people about the freedom charter so that people know what it is about, we also had pamphlets that talked about UDF, what it was about. By then we had unions like TNG, GAWU which were led by people like Samson Ndou who groomed people like Sydney Mofamadi, Jane Burrell, those were people that we worked with during that era. The union by then was organising workers on issue of labour, like unfair dismissals, payments and registration of workers but at the same time it was use more as a platform of sending out messages from outside within the country to the organizations. For instance it was SAICO that worked with SANCO, by then it was still a committee of ten led by Dr Motlala, what would happen was that if there was information that needed to be distributed e.g. stay aways and boycotts it would come to the unions and then the information would be distributed amongst to workers and then workers would distribute it to the community. The strikes that were serious during that time were the SACAWU strike for the shops like OK, the one that took six months which was organized by SACAWU, the other one was the Simron 3 where we were boycotting places like the factories that made sweets like Wilson sweets, then it was Montis and Fatties and Palmolive because they didn't want to pay workers. The unions grew during that time; there was GAWU, MGUSA, TNG, SACAWU and FAWU. GAWU formed a transport department which was a general and allied workers union, and then other workers fell on their transport division which was TNG. MGUSA changed its name to SAMWU, this is when they started to separate the unions into sectors. Salary wise it was very difficult because sometimes an organizer would go to organize

workers and thinking that they would pay him, only to find that the police are already there, workers used to pay organizers out of their own pockets so it became difficult to organize, people would go for over two months without getting anything, when they pay you the next month whatever money you get would be just that, even if its R200 or R250, there was no back pay it would just be enough money for you to get home. GAWU had a lot of health workers which is why they decided to establish NEHAWU and Teachers Union. NEHAWU would deal with nurses, clerks in hospitals and clerks in schools, which was the reason why they formed NEHAWU which was led by people like Amos Masondo and Mzwakhe Mbuli who were members of JWEP which was an educational/political school of unions. Samson Ndou were presidents of GAWU. When they formed Cosatu, they were from these structures I mentioned before; people like Barayi, Cyril Ramaphosa and Jay Naidoo were the people who formed COSATU. COSATU felt that they cannot just be an organization only for workers; they needed to have structures, which is why you found that in meetings there were people representing UDF, Cosatu, Religions like SACC, and then it meant that everyone was represented. This is a forum where serious issues like strikes and boycotts would be discussed by everyone including the SACP; it would be a joint forum for everyone including schools and churches. We had a lot of support from many churches; women from the churches were the ones who especially supported us. The ANC Women's league was banned at the time and they formed FEDZO, this structure worked a lot with women from churches because we used to have prayer days on Thursdays, there you find people like Mrs. Nokwe, Mrs. Mlangeni who was Benni Mlangeni's mother, another Mrs Mlangeni who was Andrew Mlangeni's wife and people like Winnie Mandela and Manzama, these were the people that were involved. Around my area, Mndeni, there were people like Jane Kgadi,

Teti Mkhathswa to name a few, people like Florence Sithole, Mrs Tladi who headed the Baptist church who ended up opening an NGO for orphans around Mndeni which is now called Mndeni Orphanage Home, that is where we used to hide people who were coming from exile to attend meetings inside.

The unions worked a lot, they are the ones that educated people on what was happening, when we started this union work, you couldn't say anything to people about their employers and didn't want to hear anything about how they were exploited by employers and didn't understand what you mean, but the unions gave them that political school and they understood and were able to know what you are talking about when you speak of the Freedom Charter and you speak of Education what you mean, that is what gave them the spirit to get involved in things like school governing bodies because by then many people thought these bodies were for school teachers and priests, so this opened their eyes that whatever problems they have, they are able to share them with others.

Facilitator: Just to go back, you mentioned that in the early 80s there was a formation of UDF, it was wise for unions struggle to be linked to the political struggle, but how was the mood in the very early 80s about that, just after 1976, people had gone to exile, others were in prison and others had disappeared.

Respondent: By then to be honest people were working, if you were given a mandate you knew that you had to carry it out, it didn't matter how it was going to reach the sector it needed to go to as long as it was done. The Churches also helped, when there would be commemorations like

June 16 churches would be full on those days, you could go to St Mathews and you would find the church full of people, people were really working then. Everyone would make sure that they contribute in some way, now we have been spoiled by the fact that we have a government and people tell themselves that government should do everything for them. By then people worked together, the clashes only started later between youths of AZAPO and ANC and there were now people who were called Amazimzim, there was also the issue of Emzimhlophe hostel where the police used them to fight the people, the hostel dwellers were not attacked by the people, the hostel that started to see that this was wrong was the Jabulani hostel which went back to the people in the township and told them that they were not part of the people that attacked the community.

Facilitator: In terms of recruiting people to be part of the unions, was it a struggle?

Respondent: That was the most difficult issue because you were not given a chance, now it's different because the labour laws allow us, for instance there's this policy that states that you have a right to join or not to join the union. During those days you would make an appointment with the workers during your lunch hour, you meet them as individuals in the street and they would join, others would come to your offices because they got information of where you are, when they have problems but subscription and everything was not easily done as it happens now. During those days workers only came to see you when they had problems and would tell you that they have been looking for you in the office and couldn't find you and then they would tell you about their problem, which meant people, came to us more when they had problems. Some of the workers

who were really committed and who knew how the unions worked, those who became members were the ones who also made sure that there are structures in place like office bearers for the unions.

Facilitator: In terms of funding, you mentioned before that you didn't have money, was there alternative funding?

Respondent: There were donors from outside which were controlled by Reverend Diaz Naidoo, who helped here and there but we couldn't really rely on that money, the SACP was trying to get funds for unions from outside.

Facilitator: Which union were you attached to?

Respondent: By that time it was GAWU and then moved to TNG which is now called SATAWU.

Facilitator: There was a formation of FOSATU which later was replaced by COSATU, did people speak in one voice that there should be Cosatu.

Respondent: Yes it was formed in one voice, if you remember it was formed after a year when UDF was formed, it was a mandate that came from exile that we needed to unite and have an umbrella body for the workers and that was the main aim of forming Cosatu, from then onwards we were told that it was not formed to replace the SACP, it was going to work as an umbrella body for unions, the SACP was going to work as a vanguard for workers and then the ANC as we all know was the political party.

Facilitator: Was there no tension between workers, you know some of them that they didn't want the unions to be associated with ANC, PAC or AZAPO, etc.

Respondent: That only came about after Cosatu had already started working and unions affiliated to it, after that PAC came with NAPWU but most workers through freedom charter which worked a lot for workers because it was the only political document that was available agreed with Cosatu.

Facilitator: So the attitude of the employers over the unions?

Respondent: The attitude of employers only changed after 1994 because of labour laws, before you could not easily meet with workers and when the workers would embark on a strike it was up to you to make sure that they are able to get back to work, because some of the employers even now they dismiss employees when they want to strike, that is why back then you would find some shops boycotted which made sure that they take workers seriously.

Facilitator: Any other methods which were used to make sure employers listen to workers, other than boycotts.

Respondent: We would use boycotts and go slows.

Facilitator: Were go-slows effective?

Respondent: Yes they were effective especially where they worked on production.

Facilitator: Looking at women issues in union structures.

Respondent: Most women were not registered in the companies, take the nurses for instance, they only started now to be registered in UIF and another issue for women was maternity leave, in other companies women would go back to work hardly ten days after giving birth because they were afraid to lose their jobs.

Facilitator: You mean there was nothing protecting women against such issues.

Respondent: There was nothing protecting them against the exploitation at work, some of them were using their bodies to make sure that they got hired in that company and also to get promotion.

Facilitator: When there were females working in unions, were there no chauvinistic attitudes that existed towards women and so on.

Respondent: There were all over and they would remind us that it's a man's world and we as women would also end up walking with our heads down, even in school there were those attitudes.

Facilitator: And how such issues were dealt with in particular women issues.

Respondent: We are trying; even now we feel that this thing of human trafficking affects women more than men, you go to places like the Eastern Cape where they are still practicing "ukuthwalwa" of girls, and it

also affects us. The unskilled and unpaid labour still affects us especially girls.

Facilitator: In terms of in-services training were there crash courses that you used to provide.

Respondent: Yes we used have crash courses especially on issues of sexual harassment, we had a person that was training women on that, even now we are going to have a course which trains women on issues of leadership. Some companies are doing training for women in skills development.

Facilitator: Are they effective or were they effective?

Respondent: Yes they are effective.

Facilitator: Then post 1994 what should have been the role of unions, do you think they are ok where they are now?

Respondent: Where they are now they have developed a lot because they managed to get within the companies and negotiate for workers membership and got recognized.

Facilitator: Just a few last questions, you mentioned that after 1976, other people like Tsietsi went to exile, others remained within, there was formation of AZAPO in 1978 or so, you said there was a tension where others wanted to take a certain direction and others wanted to go another. What exactly happened, just to unpack that a bit?

Respondent: The way I see it, it was the issue of leadership, for instance if I was a secretary in SASCO and there would be a change in leadership and others would feel that they want to go and form their own party that is where there would be a split. For instance, when AZAPO was formed it was the day UDF was formed, people who were behind UDF had done a lot of spade work and if you go back to archives you will see that the number of people that attended the congress of UDF were about five times more than people who went to Cape Town, also if you look at the formation of Cosatu it is the time that NAPTU was formed and again if you look at the launch of Cosatu you will see that the people that attended Cosatu congress you will see that Cosatu had done their spade work, so it was about who was more powerful and who was more influential.

Facilitator: So when you look back what would you say were the difficult challenges of the unions?

Respondent: The challenges of the unions were reaching people, when you are supposed to go down to the people, the difficulties were whether you were talking to the right people or you would find yourself spending the night in John Vorster square. There would be times where you would be sitting in your offices and suddenly see police coming in, for instance GAWU offices were in Chancellor house which was former President Mandela's office, sometimes the police would come into the office and find open and you sitting inside but you could tell them that you were there looking for the union people as well and they would believe you and start telling you about how bad the unions are and how they were robbing you of your money, you would listen and then when you want to run away you could tell them thank you and just walk out, we couldn't own offices that had one entrance like this back then, we had to make

sure that there's a back door that staff can use when someone tells them that the police are coming, you would just go out of the office back door and sit with people outside, so it was difficult then but now when they come to the office they just bring a letter and tell you what they want, but during those times I was difficult.

Facilitator: Were arrests very prevalent then and how did it disturb the running of the union?

Respondent: Sometimes a person would be expecting me to come and represent them either at the labour court or in the company and all of sudden they would hear that I was arrested by the police on my way or the day before. Some of them like Vincent and Mathew Moroka, you could meet them in the street and not recognize them because they would sometimes be in crutches and others with long beards and it would be them that would come and greet you and then you would see that its them, they had to disguise themselves to run away from the police.

Facilitator: Were the union court cases winnable.

Respondent: It would depend on the person representing you, let me be honest about that because sometimes you would go there and the case would be dismissed and say it was an issue between an employer and employee, and also other employees would just leave things be because if they didn't work they wouldn't get paid, that is why you would find people being called "amagundwane".

Facilitator: In terms of your family, you mentioned before that sometimes you wouldn't have a salary because sometimes you would find that

workers didn't contribute and you must take whatever you get, and of course sometime the situation would be people are expecting you there and to find you have been arrested, how did that impact on the family.

Respondent: Some family carried on under those circumstances because they were a tight family unit but some of them ended up without families, I can give you an example about a few men, there's one who died not a while ago who ended up living alone because his wife said she couldn't stand for a person who had an unstable job, some of them ended up living for handouts, that is why some of the members of MK complaining because they don't have a source of income and can't have food, sometimes some of them would be lucky because they still had family that would give them bread to eat.

Facilitator: Do you think there is a sense of regret because of such conditions from other comrades?

Respondent: I don't have any regrets from my side because at the present moment if you look at where we come from and look at the progress that has been made I don't see any regrets, but there are some who are treated badly from home and there are people who don't cope when they find that things are not working out for them as they hoped and they end up regretting.

Facilitator: Some of the things that you consider as weaknesses of the unions when you look back.

Respondent: Firstly when it comes to working conditions of women are some of the things we are still fighting for, for instance child care facilities, I

come from Soweto to work here and leave my child to attend school there, I have to organize transport to pick her up and drop her off and sometimes you find that the transport doesn't even pick her up and luckily the neighbour would see the child and call him into her house but if I had access to child care during working hours that would help. The other thing is that women were disadvantaged because issues faced by women would be given to men to push forward and you find that that issue would be a disadvantage to men if it was allowed, so they don't push them forward. So if I had child care facilities for my child when I was attending union meetings that would have helped.

Facilitator: Which of the issues men wouldn't push because they disadvantaged them?

Respondent: For instance the issue of the child care I was talking about. The issue of UIF, people didn't understand what you benefit by contributing to UIF, how it would help when you are on maternity leave. Even now here are men who do not understand about UIF, they only think you can claim when you are not working not knowing that you can even claim if you were not able to go to work and the company will not pay you, it is your right to claim UIF for that time.

Facilitator: What did you do to address such issues as women?

Respondent: Women are getting UIF when they are on maternity leave. They were also not considered for skills development, they saw training women as a waste.

Facilitator: Personally when you look back, was it worth it to be involved in union issues or do you think perhaps you could have lived your life differently, perhaps become a priest (laughs).

Respondent: By then the priests that I associated with, some of them were assisting in union activities (laughs). I don't regret to find myself involved in unions, they opened up my mind and they trained me to be more assertive and have gained life skills, for instance I have sort of become the lawyer in the family, if my sister has problems with her husband I can advise her on how to handle the issue, so I have learnt a lot on how to handle problems.

Facilitator: Is there anything else that you think we should have covered and talked about that you think is important?

Respondent: The only thing that I could say even though its not directly related to this interview, I feel that as people we should be patient with each other, we used to think this put her down syndrome only applies to women but it happens with everybody. People need to stop blackmailing each other, for instance if I don't have proof that you are misusing company funds, then I blackmail you, it must stop.

Facilitator: Any closing word maybe?

Respondent: Women need to meet with other women, network with each other in order to gain knowledge and pull each other up.

Facilitator: Mama thank you very much for your time, I am grateful.

Respondent: Thank you.

Collection Number: A3402

Collection Name: Labour Struggles Project, Interviews, 2009-2012

PUBLISHER:

Publisher: Historical Papers Research Archive, University of the Witwatersrand

Location: Johannesburg

©2016

LEGAL NOTICES:

Copyright Notice: All materials on the Historical Papers website are protected by South African copyright law and may not be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, displayed, or otherwise published in any format, without the prior written permission of the copyright owner.

Disclaimer and Terms of Use: Provided that you maintain all copyright and other notices contained therein, you may download material (one machine readable copy and one print copy per page) for your personal and/or educational non-commercial use only.

People using these records relating to the archives of Historical Papers, The Library, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, are reminded that such records sometimes contain material which is uncorroborated, inaccurate, distorted or untrue. While these digital records are true facsimiles of paper documents and the information contained herein is obtained from sources believed to be accurate and reliable, Historical Papers, University of the Witwatersrand has not independently verified their content. Consequently, the University is not responsible for any errors or omissions and excludes any and all liability for any errors in or omissions from the information on the website or any related information on third party websites accessible from this website.

This document forms part of a collection, held at the Historical Papers Research Archive, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa.