

Nomvula Mkhize

Facilitator: This is an interview with Nomvula Pauline Mkhize we are at Kwa-Thema, the date is 18 September 2011, interview is done by Brown Maaba. Thanks very much for your time, speak any language you are comfortable with. Please give me a background as to how you ended up in the factories, why did you have to go and look for a job in the factories?

Respondent: I did not finish my schooling but I joined Wakonoge which changed to I and J, and then now it is McCain.

Facilitator: which year did you start working there?

Respondent: I think it was 1980 or so

Facilitator: but why did you leave school?

Respondent: My parents did not have money to take me through schooling

Facilitator: at which level did you stop studying?

Respondent: Form I, I did not complete it and went to work at Wakonoge?? – the requirement at the time was Mashigisha certificate

Facilitator: can you explain what Mashigisha certificate is?

Respondent: What do you call it, what used to happen is, you would be asked to answer a question on paper and choose the correct one

Facilitator: aptitude test?

Respondent: ja

Facilitator: how was the system, did they come and fetch you from the township or did you go to the firms to find work?

Respondent: we used to go and stand outside the gate looking for work, they will come and ask if you had a Shigisha certificate to stand one side and the ones who didn't to stand on the other side.

Facilitator: how long did it take for you to find work? A year, two years, six months or two days?

Respondent: I think two years

Facilitator: and eventually you got the job in 1980?

Respondent: yes

Facilitator: what kind of work were you looking for?

Respondent: any kind of job, at Wakonoge they employed people from the township.

Facilitator: so you were told that there are opportunities or did you just go and find yourself a job?

Respondent: I found it myself, I heard that they were looking for people and I went to stand at the gate

Facilitator: how were you employed?

Respondent: We would stand there, the personnel officer would come and choose people and take them inside, after that we go through the tests, after that we were employed. When they retrenched we were not retrenched they instead appointed us on a permanent basis.

Facilitator: when were the retrenchments, as you arrived or how ..?

Respondent: we worked according to the vegetable seasons, for instance let's say now its a season for peas, then in January the work slows down and we re-work and put them in boxes, we seal and the food is sent to the fridges, then the trucks come and collect and deliver.

Facilitator: so you only dealt with vegetables only?

Respondent: yes frozen vegetables, it later became I and J, the name was changed recently to McCain. It is still owned by the name owners, they just changed the name, they kept on telling us that we are moving but to date we have not moved. I am currently receiving disability, they told me that they can no longer pay it because other people do not wear protective clothing. What they do not understand is the chill of the fridges is chill and there isn't much you can do to it.

Facilitator: When you first started working there did you know the kind of work you will be expected to do?

Respondent: I only knew when I was there, I would see trucks coming in and out, our work was done based on the vegetable season – we will first start by sorting the vegetables, wash them and then put them in the fridge, and then it goes to the next stage.

Facilitator: so you only dealt with frozen vegetables?

Respondent: Yes

Facilitator: I thought I and J also dealt with fish as well?

Respondent: Fish was not done at our factory, we would receive fish boxes from Cape Town, we had a tuck shop where we would buy the fish

Facilitator: the majority of employees where were they from or was everybody from Kwa-Thema?

Respondent: we were from Kwa-Thema, others were from Dirklfontein, Springs as a whole

Facilitator: In terms of women, was it mostly women?

Respondent: we had men too

Facilitator: so the employees were mixed both men and women?

Respondent: yes they were mixed

Facilitator: did you all do the same kind of job?

Respondent: there was a packing department which had weighing machines, others were put into plain plastics others into McCain plastics, we also had choice, standard and under grades – quality control will decide how to grade the food.

Facilitator: Did you not have problems with men?

Respondent: no their work was to dip the product, women could not do that because it was heavy, they sometimes had to use a forklift to lift the products

Facilitator: was there no conflict regarding who does what between men and women?

Respondent: at times we were forced to do men's work, for instance the short bin, we ask the driver to set the kilo and then we press, it dips – after the process it goes through repack and then it is graded and then packaged into plastic bags.

Facilitator: How was the work, difficult or easy or do you feel you were being exploited?

Respondent: Sometimes it was nice easy work, sometimes we would be forced to assist the men, it depended on the work load.

Facilitator: did you do it because you are forced to do so or were you forced to do the work?

Respondent: we had to assist, sometimes a person has gone to the bathroom, we cannot all wait for that person work had to continue

Facilitator: so you were working as a team?

Respondent: yes we were a good team

Facilitator: In terms of unions, how and when were they introduced in your factory?

Respondent: I think it was in the 1970s

Facilitator: how did they start as far as you can remember?

Respondent: the organisers came to our factory and recruited us, we were working hard and felt that we are not getting decent wages, we felt exploited. The employer chased the unions away, later on with time they spoke to the employer and we were later invited to a meeting and told about unions. They explained the benefits of belonging to a union. We started understanding worker rights.

Facilitator: In your case did the unions make a difference to you?

Respondent: the negotiations took long. At the time we used to wear our own clothes there was not protective clothing, people were constantly sick. After the unions were introduced we were given protective clothing. It is unfortunate that some of the protective clothing came when we were already damaged.

Facilitator: when did they start giving you protective clothing?

Respondent: they started with whites boots, then later safety boots, then track suits, on our side we were given flying suits

Facilitator: did you not complain about the chill before the unions were introduced?

Respondent: we did, after working in the chill we were expected to go and stand in the sun, we then asked management to get us a hot box, they eventually did it, we would exchange getting into the hot box and did not stay long in the chill.

Facilitator: did the unions make a difference for the workers?

Respondent: yes things changed a lot after the unions were introduced, some of us were already damaged by the chill.

Facilitator: how did the unions benefit you?

Respondent: we earned better wages, depending on the kind of work you did, also the protective clothing, including flying suits, socks, track suits and copper hats – I am still sick from the chill, it has affected me a lot. It damaged me. They do not want to pay me my blue card, pension and other benefits, I am getting a disability grant from the insurance company, I will only get my money when I turn 60 – do women go on pension at 60?

Facilitator: yes

Respondent: what about men?

Facilitator: 65

Respondent: I am earning a little bit of money

Facilitator: how did unions attend to such issues?

Respondent: the shop stewards informed the employer that people are sick at work, some have even died from the chill

Facilitator: really

Respondent: yes some die, others survive like me

Facilitator: were the families of those who died taken care of?

Respondent: I think if you died they will give the family vegetables and I think also the burial money

Facilitator: were the unions successful?

Respondent: yes they did we no longer work under pressure like we did in the past

Facilitator: Do women get maternity benefits?

Respondent: yes we have and men also have paternity leave

Facilitator: was it there in the early 1980s?

Respondent: no we didn't have it in those days

Facilitator: what would happen if you were pregnant?

Respondent: Others would have a baby and come back to work the following day

Facilitator: haibo?

Respondent: what would you do, if you took longer you would be forced to re-apply. Now women get three months maternity leave and continue with your service

Facilitator: but back then you had to sort yourself out?

Respondent: yes they were crooking us, they could see that you are pregnant but they will not let you stay longer at home, so people would come back the following day after giving birth, otherwise they will have to re-apply again from the gate.

Facilitator: what other rights did women have?

Respondent: doctor's notes, we were allowed at least 2 or 3 weeks a year

Facilitator: Is that not leave?

Respondent: the factory closed in December, for three or four weeks

Facilitator: so during the year you couldn't take leave?

Respondent: you would take the doctors note and take leave in June or whenever you are ready. If you took that kind of leave you were no longer eligible for leave, should you take sick leave it will be treated as unpaid leave.

Facilitator: so to date things are still the same?

Respondent: we now have leave and doctors notes remained the same

Facilitator: In the workplace, how safe was the work place?

Respondent: they make sure that there are safety precautions in place to avoid accidents, before they did not, now there are safety precautions

Facilitator: before what was likely to be dangerous to employees?

Respondent: quite a lot, in the past things would be hanging around, engineering was not done properly, a casual staff member was hit by a machine cutter and she died on the spot. Another one's hand was chopped off by a cutting machine, the whole hand was gone. She had to use an artificial arm and went back to work.

Facilitator: how does a union deal with such cases?

Respondent: I don't think she belonged to the union, I think the company paid her out.

Facilitator: what about the one who died?

Respondent: She was a casual worker, we don't know what happened to her, they didn't care about casual workers. Some people would wait around the gate hoping to be called in, one of them died right there at the gate, it was cold.

Facilitator: which union introduced itself first, which one did you join?

Respondent: the first union was .., I can't remember the name ...

Facilitator: what about FOSATU?

Respondent: I think it was FOSATU and another one, there was a time where we had two unions at the same time, there was a lot of fights at the time, both unions were competing and each one wanted to get the highest numbers

Facilitator: how did that happen?

Respondent: it's because of us, if I want a certain union because I know the organiser you will want to recruit the people to join that union, and then maybe someone else is doing the same for the other union. For instance people like Chris Dlamini got us to join their union

Facilitator: so you ended up joining FAWU?

Respondent: yes

Facilitator: before FAWU where did you belong?

Respondent: I can't remember the name, it's been in existence for quite some time, there was also another man who didn't want us to join the union he wanted us to join him and if you don't want to join he didn't make it easy for us

Facilitator: how did he want you to join him, did he have his own union?

Respondent: He didn't want us to join the union, he was supporting the employer because the employer did not want unions. We used to call him "uncle"

Facilitator: was he the "yes baas type"

Respondent: yes

Facilitator: so what happened in the end?

Respondent: We joined the union, we didn't want him we wanted the union, people were being fired and hurt and nothing was happening for us

Facilitator: what was he promising to do for the workers?

Respondent: nothing

Facilitator: so do you think the employer was giving him something on the side?

Respondent: we think so but he didn't tell us anything, he told us that if he was to be fired he will be okay at home, he had a shop, tractor, livestock etc., we had nothing in the townships – he would say "alles is reg baas, ek saal die kaffirs se" – he is now also a baas, he wears a dust coat. I also heard that Baba Snikkie is also sick, he was a foreman. Do you know him, he used to drive a grey BMW, he's short? He also used to be a foreman and he didn't care for people at all, it is only now that he treats people with respect. He resigned but apparently he went back, I believe he is currently sick, arthritis of the bones or something like that. He had just been given a permanent position. Things are bad.

Facilitator: When you say a lot of people were cold from working in the cold environment, where are they now?

Respondent: Most of them died, the rest – people used to handle ice on their bare hands when they were packaging spinach, they used a lot of ice and was handled by hand. Someone died from that, she had to use a wheelchair

Facilitator: really?

Respondent: yes, apparently the company paid him the monies that were due to him. He extended his house and was beginning to lose his memory, eventually she died.

Facilitator: You also mentioned that you there were two unions?

Respondent: yes they were two but eventually we were left with one

Facilitator: was the other union not affiliated to Inkatha?

Respondent: not really, there was no respect amongst the two unions, I think SAFATU and FAWU

Facilitator: so which one was chosen?

Respondent: they eventually joined FAWU

Facilitator: what happened to the other one?

Respondent: the others then joined FAWU too

Facilitator: The FAWU leaders, how were they after you joined?

Respondent: "*alles is reg baas*" – they just accepted anything from management, the organisers used to speak on our behalf

Facilitator: tell me about the shop stewards, can you remember any of them, those that were strong in FAWU?

Respondent: Busi Madloba, Obed Nzimande, Nomsa Ndlanzi (interruption - she was coughing), Mary Ndala, Ndumiso I forgot the surname (interruption) "my legs are killing me, I've been going to physio but it is not helping. I can't sit on couches, I have to sit right here and wherever I sit I must make sure I am next to the bathroom" – this is all because of the cold environment I worked in for a long time.

Facilitator: tell me about the shop stewards, let's start with Nomsa Ndlanzi for instance, let's start with her?

Respondent: the first ones that we had were useless but these ones were good, they fought for workers rights

Facilitator: which were the first ones?

Respondent: the ones that we voted out when we voted for FAWU

Facilitator: the first union what was it called?

Respondent: SAFATU

Facilitator: how were the shop stewards?

Respondent: "*alles is reg baas*" when give them a mandate they would agree to everything that management is putting on the table. The new ones understood our grievances, they stood for the workers, they would tell the employer that you keep changing names, machinery and everything else but you are not paying the workers a living wage. Sometimes we would work about 24 hours earning ..

Facilitator: really

Respondent: yes. I remember one day I worked night shift, we did not go home until two in the afternoon the following day after working night shift. The trucks were waiting to take the vegetables out, peas cannot be kept overnight so we had to work until 2 in the afternoon. If it is kept overnight or over a weekend it will turn brown which means it must be thrown out

Facilitator: were you paid overtime?

Respondent: yes they did, but what they do now is if we finish working at let's say 10, they ask us to leave, this is happening right now, people have to clock out immediately, they don't even care whether there's transport or not, fortunately we have telephone numbers of taxis and they will come and collect us, it can be 2 or 12, delivery costs to take us home are at our expense

Facilitator: so you clock out before 6 in the morning?

Respondent: yes immediately if we finish

Facilitator: Did people not complain about exploitation?

Respondent: the employer would say "what am I supposed to do?" – the shop stewards couldn't deal with this matter.

Facilitator: Tell me about Busi Madloba, how was she as a shop steward?

Respondent: I believe she was fired because she was conniving with management, the workers asked her to step down, she is no longer a shop steward she is at home

Facilitator: but in the beginning how was she?

Respondent: she was fine

Facilitator: why did you vote her in?

Respondent: at the time she was good and she delivered

Facilitator: like what?

Respondent: she would take our mandate to the employer. She used to work in the Stores Department. She was later working in the office, this is after I had left the company, she's been home for 1 or 2 years. Apparently they toyi toyed for her – a meeting was held and people did not want her anymore.

Facilitator: what happened to Obed Nzimande?

Respondent: The employer bought him out, he also belonged to Izraya?? – don't you know him, he used to be at overline?

Facilitator: Obed?

Respondent: yes. He was a tough nut to crack so the employer wanted to fire him but could not find fault in him, eventually they managed to fire him, but I think they bought him out. He did nothing wrong, he just didn't agree with them, he was tough. He stood for the workers and the employer was after him. Another one was Steven Rakuba, he was also a shop steward, the employer offered him the superintendent position just to keep him quiet. He was also very good. What the employers did was if they noticed that you knew what you were doing they would

give you a management position so that you cannot get involved in union matters. They offer you a carrot and you forget about the workers.

Facilitator: what about Nomsa Ndlazi?

Respondent: She is still working but she is no longer a shop steward, but its the same

Facilitator: how was she as a shop steward?

Respondent: she was okay but at times they did not listen to the mandate by workers

Facilitator: did men complain about female shop stewards?

Respondent: they complained about men too, since I left I believe they appointed Oupa, I don't know his surname there's new people, Oupa and ex-permanent who went back to work, but I believe there are new shop stewards – I don't know most of them. Nowadays they do not sit and negotiate like in the past, the employer just tells them that he has no money, they toyi toyi one day and the following day they are back at work. The shop stewards are not negotiating for the workers.

Facilitator: but back then in the 1980s how were strikes conducted, did you have strikes in those days?

Respondent: Yes we striked in those years, we would first start with "go slow" and then later on it develops to a legal strike, we also used to do what is called sabotage if the employer was not barging on giving us money, we would break the machines, the sealing machines etc., at times even stab the tyres for the trucks, there were no cameras in those days. We used to fight and were not begging

Facilitator: what did the employer do in that case?

Respondent: they would give us the little bit they could afford, for instance if we wanted 15% they would offer us maybe 9%, the shop stewards would ask us to accept the offer because in some cases the strike had been on for a long time. We used to take the shop stewards to task and sometimes accuse them of being bought by the employer.

Facilitator: In most cases what did you strike for?

Respondent: The first strike was for safety, the cold environment, a safe environment so that machines are welded properly and not lying all over the place, protective clothing for the cold environment. I have arthritis right now, we also striked for better wages

Facilitator: the safety strike, how was it eventually solved?

Respondent: they bought us track suits, flying suits, the right socks – we stopped wearing plastic boots and received protective clothing

Facilitator: were the clothes right, were the workers happy with the protective clothing?

Respondent: its just the same, a cold environment will remain cold, the clothing did not help much.

Facilitator: Did you work day or night shifts?

Respondent: we worked both, day shift, night shift

Facilitator: did this apply to both males and females?

Respondent: yes it was the same for all of us (interruption) – working in factories is not so nice, you've never seen anything like it

Facilitator: did they not feel for the female employees and made them to work day shift only?

Respondent: right through day shift, definite no, if you don't want to work night shift .., unless if you were mourning and was wearing black clothes they would allow it, and also if you had just returned from maternity leave and you were breast feeding, even so you were given a time limit to breast feed, after three months you are forced to go back to the normal shifts like everybody else. The shifts were terrible.

Facilitator: so the three months you are on day shift, you are not on maternity but you are working?

Respondent: ja, you don't work night shift but you are working, Fridays we would do a quick change, maybe we would work 2 to 10

Facilitator: 2 to 10 and then 10 to ..?

Respondent: 10 to 6

Facilitator: you worked all those shifts?

Respondent: yes, things were bad in our factory. Nowadays they've employed young people who think they will sort the company out, they are still complaining to date. I believe they also make sweets, when I worked there they did not make sweets. Maybe they will get it right because they are young, they say they will not work like us they will fix the company. At the moment I am paralysed and they still have not paid me out.

Facilitator: what about the wage strikes?

Respondent: We used to beat up those that went to work, we called them "rats" but we had to disguise so that they cannot identify. We wanted them to join us in the strike. Some workers were terrified of the employer and did not want to go on strike. You guys are very fortunate because you are educated, nowadays a lot of black people are educated and the white people do not have a chance, it is not

like in the olden days whereby only white people were educated and blacks were not. People like brother Clint were damaged by the type of work they did. He should have taken what was offered to him. He worked for the company for thirty something years. Now he is back home, he doesn't want to come here, his mother was buried three or four weeks bad.

Facilitator: did they pay him?

Respondent: no nothing, things are difficult for him. He is now working in Johannesburg. His wife left him because he did not help her, he is suffering now and had to go back home, he is working but has nothing to show.

Facilitator: The strikes were they successful?

Respondent: some were successful others not. The employer would give us an ultimatum that if we are not back at work by such a day we will be dismissed. Others are successful others not. The shop stewards would come and report back to us

Facilitator: you also complained about the machines, what was wrong with the machines?

Respondent: the machines were not in good condition because they were not properly serviced, also the environment was not safe, things were hanging. We worked in very unsafe surroundings although the firm was progressing.

Facilitator: You were also involved in marches, Bishop Tutu and others, were those related to your work?

Respondent: People like Bishop Tutu and the others would join us if we had funerals, in most instances of members etc. People like Chris Dlamini and the others used to also join in

Facilitator: what role did they play?

Respondent: they would support us in our bereavement, we've lost a member. It was different with different companies, Jabula, Kellogg's etc., we got together and toyi toyed and buried our member.

Facilitator: After 1990 what happened when Mandela was released?

Respondent: They seemed to be coming right but not all was given attention

Facilitator: what happened, did things come right on their own?

Respondent: Things came right because the shop stewards were empowered

Facilitator: what is the status in the factories right now?

Respondent: They still work the shifts, workers at I and J do not toyi toyi anymore, the employer does as he wishes. Things are worse now, on TV people were complaining about wages, they were not given what they were asking for. They buy you a house and give you a small subsidy. Nothing seems to come right, one must just save for oneself. Buy the important things and save money for darker days, ensure that you are properly insured.

Facilitator: when you had strikes at work did this not affect your family life?

Respondent: no, we would strike if a person was fired for no good reason, we would toyi toyi, the shop stewards would advise us to stay out of it, that is how Busi was fired. Other people were no longer interested in striking. One year we slept at work on the floor, we wanted a better wage, nothing happened, we came back with nothing, the employer told us he can only afford 4%. So the organisers encouraged us to accept the money, the employer gave us an ultimatum, if you are not back at work you are fired by such and such a day. We didn't know what happened during negotiations. Union issues were difficult. One employee was burnt by the workers for not wanting to go on strike

Facilitator: were the workers arrested for doing this?

Respondent: at first nobody knew what happened, we all denied we did not see anything, nowadays there's cameras and people cannot deny anything because of the technology. Some people do not join the strike they just stay home and only come to work when the strike is over, it was safer that way.

Facilitator: why did the "rats" not join the union? Why did they become rats?

Respondent: they were bought, we will never know what happens people have their own secrets. A lot of things happen after hours. One day I was coming from a funeral, some guy came into my house and knocked, he asked for me and he told me about what they've been stealing, he later asked me what my visitors wanted.

Facilitator: are you saying you are never going back to work?

Respondent: it will depend, they come and check on me, I won't be able to go to work because of my leg, I cannot work, I would like to go back to work but it will be difficult because I won't be able to walk. I have found Jesus and feel free.

Facilitator: anything that is important that we did not talk about regarding factories in general?

Respondent: white people do not want to pay decent wages, there are too many deductions, the bank charges you bank charges, your debit orders are taken from your salary, you are left with nothing. What unions need to do is arrange for employers to pay the debit orders directly. For instance there should be benefits for employees with long service, buy the employee a house so that the employee does not pay bank charges. They still have not given me my blue card and service money, I am earning R2000 and something a month which helps me to buy food (disability). I am grateful that we are insured what would have happened to me if I was not insured? Then I have to pay for services as well – we pay for everything. Unions are not always beneficial, you may end up being a "ja baas" person, the employer gives me money so that I can sell my fellow colleagues, we fight amongst each other.

Facilitator: are there white people working at I and J?

Respondent: yes a lot, others are even cleaners?

Facilitator: during your time did they have a lot of whites?

Respondent: yes they worked in the office with some black people who are educated. Nowadays white people also do the same work as us. The only problem is white people do not want to speak our languages. I didn't speak to them in their white languages. Why can't we black people speak our languages.

Facilitator: so white people have also joined the union?

Respondent: yes they did but it is clear they joined for the benefits.

Facilitator: Any closing word about unions?

Respondent: The unions must fix our disability benefits, I am still a union member and paying my subscription.

Facilitator: what are the unions saying?

Respondent: they say they cannot get involved because the insurance company is subsidising me. I received a letter from the insurance company, I have to inform them if I want to change my dependents.

Facilitator: what are they saying in the letter I might not understand?

Respondent: it is about your children's benefits – I am divorcing – Lucky and Linda, now I want to take ..(unclear), now I want to add my husband we are still not divorced maybe he has included me in his pension. When you die they just want the paperwork and pay out. There are no percentages I want the firm to decide on my behalf. They are giving me an opportunity to change my beneficiaries.

Facilitator: this is your decision.

END

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