

Bethuel Maseremane

Facilitator: This is an interview with Bethuel Maseremane we are in Johannesburg, Rosebank, the date is 29 July 2009 the interview is done by Brown Maaba. Thanks very much for your time. Could you maybe just outline your background, where you come from, the kind of family you came from and what motivated you to get involved in the unions and actually how you ended up in the world of unions.

Respondent: I grew up in the rural areas in Nebo District, Sekhukhune in Limpopo. My family belongs to the royal house, my father is a chief's son, the throne was not his, the throne went to his half brother if you like. He was a teacher and eventually head master. He tried to have a great influence in terms of my upbringing and especially encouraging me and other children to take education seriously.

Unfortunately I had to break out of school after high school and enter the labour market, the family situation was not conducive for me to take up studies at the time and it became clear to me that we needed some income in the family, especially also to support my siblings and I thought at my age I can afford to sacrifice my education in order to help my siblings to get a good education. That was around 1981, I completed my Matric in 1980. So in 1981 I came to the cities

Facilitator: I would think that is normal but I'm subject to correction, I would think that normal as someone who comes from a royal family you are financially privileged. Why is it that your family was struggling?

Respondent: It's the function of polygamous marriages that you find. Well generally in rural areas, particularly in the royal families. Almost every man there would have more than one wife and in my family it was no exception. So in such circumstances the ability of the head of the family to take care of the children, you find, in my family we were five, I think about five in the second and about four in the first wife. So we would be a total of 15 children or so. And also family politics which would affect the manner in which the head of the family takes care of, and I thought that in my family we had some disadvantages. I was the first born and I had to make serious calculations about how my side of the family will grow up and that is why I felt that a lot of basics, there were a lot of basic needs that were facing my side of the family and there were a couple of children after me. So that put a lot of pressure on me in terms of education.

Facilitator: so your decision to come to Johannesburg how was it made? Why Johannesburg?

Respondent: I made my way into Johannesburg after firstly landing in Pretoria, I have relatives in Pretoria, so I kind of used to stay around with them and even during the time of my schooling but then whilst I was there I kind of made way to other relatives here in Jo'burg. And that is how I got to know about job opportunities and finally got into the labour market.

Facilitator: The kind of jobs that you were looking for when you initially when you came down to Jo'burg, what kind of jobs. Did you know that you are going to end up in the world of labour?

Respondent: I didn't, obviously from the rural areas, access to education and politics, even stories about our political history are sometimes difficult to come across, especially during those days of repression, people were reluctant to talk. So I knew a little bit, completing Matric in 1980, a few years after the 1976 student uprisings. That shed some light on the kind of society we had and why people were rising up in protest. So I think 1976 did make an impact on my mind and my thinking about life and our society. And so when I kind of found some work, I was employed in the metal company. I think the majority of the co-workers there were people that either dropped out of school in 1976 or after 1976, and were bringing with them this kind of militancy into the workplace – their spirit of defiance and things like that. But again, at that time unionism was really taking route, from 1973 labour strikes that ..(unclear) talks about in her book, then the student protests in 1976. So by the time of the 1980s I think unions were beginning to emerge in quite a strong way. I found that mood about unionism in place. Maybe I should also mention that one of my uncles was a very strong ANC member, he left in the 1970s or around 1980 and joined MK. So he used to tell me a lot about politics, the struggle and the liberation movement. So from the little bit he told me, what I heard from other people and the mood I found around Jo'burg when I came I felt inspired and interested in joining the worker struggle.

Facilitator: which institution did you work for?

Respondent: It was a company within Barlowrand Group, they call themselves Barlow World now, they manufacture aluminium products

Facilitator: and how did you make your connections into that particular company, was it by chance maybe?

Respondent: I had a cousin who was working there, and immediately after establishing that I was around in Jo'burg and I was not continuing with my studies, he invited me to consider some postings at the company. I got a clerical job in their service department. I immediately took up the job

Facilitator: where were you based exactly, which section of Johannesburg?

Respondent: I was based in Alexander, the company was based in Elandsfontein, next to the airport, in the industrial heart

Facilitator: How did you find Barlow World itself, politically, racially and otherwise, the outlook of it?

Respondent: I think what struck me there was, obviously you will find that management is almost exclusively white, it is like you are working in the microcosm of the ..(unclear) society, we are ruled by whites and managed by whites and there were still those discriminatory practices, especially in terms of toilets, whites and blacks had their own toilets. The colour of management of management, the facilities that are available that clearly gave you a sense about the problems that we have in society that are also prevalent in the company. But again I found that the workers had a lot of grievances around wages, around issues of health and safety and so there were lots of issues that were just coming up.

Facilitator: But at the time when you came was there a union already, considering the fact that workers had complaints, were they silent or were the complaints?

Respondent: I think around 1981 there wasn't really a union at the time, they had liaison committee structures. Until 1979 the law in South Africa did not recognise blacks as workers, only whites were recognised as workers and therefore only whites could join unions, because you can join a union if you are a worker, so if you are not recognised as a worker you can't join a union. So it's only in 1979 that the government was able to start amending the Labour Relations Framework. But for a while they were still trying to consign black workers to be represented by workplace committees, not organisations, so liaison committees were such a mechanism of communicating grievances to management. You are asked to elect people through a process facilitated by management that would then have to make management to communicate their issues. I found that kind of arrangement ..., I found, what struck me at that time as being a lot more compliant, a bit more conservative. The last portion of them were women and they looked like, very much under duress in terms of their family arrangements to focus on just feeding for families and children rather, indulging in struggles.

So I left them in 1983, I worked for a period of 2 years. I managed to raise a bursary because I was still interested in furthering my education. So they were able to give me a bursary

Facilitator: Barlow World?

Respondent: the company's name was called Aluminium Extrusion Company (Almex). They gave me a bursary and went to Turfloop in 1983 and I registered for a degree in administration

Facilitator: at the time was it very easy to get a bursary from a white based company and so on, as early as 1983?

Respondent: I think in the spirit of say, philanthropic actions, some social responsibility, corporate investment spirit there already was that tendency by companies to do a few things. But again that didn't really give me much. They were not funding my entire studies, they just gave me .., it was actually not a bursary it was a grant. They gave me a grant to push me through. I sort of thought that if I progressed in my studies they would have been available to continuing with the grant. But they just gave me a small grant that would see me through registration processes, buying a couple of books, but for the rest I was supporting myself.

Facilitator: so what was gain for them in return?

Respondent: I think my sense is that, firstly they expected me to come back to work for them, so it could have been an investment in training someone who can bring back the skills to benefit the company. The second thing I think, Barlow Rand they were already clear that they were emerging as one of the strong conglomerates, South Africa always had a few conglomerates which lied at the heart of the economy and Barlow World was one of them. It's a very strong industrial kind of grouping. So my sense I think was, they wanted some pretty good credentials as an important player which also did something socially.

Facilitator: Outline how the place looked like when you arrived at Turfloop? It was in the mid-1980s, whether you got involved in political structures and so on, whether you were bringing the worker experience on the ground?

Respondent: Turfloop I found it already highly politicised, as you know there were events at Turfloop in the years before, Onkgopotse Tiro stories etc. I think student organisations like SASO had really made an impact there. So Turfloop was really famous for brewing lots of protest, producing activists if you like, hosting lots of ..., the one thing there, the SRC would always be an important opportunity for hosting political gatherings and activities. There were also student movements. That was the year in which the UDF was formed, and also the year in which, on the ANC side, the year in which something called National Forum was also formed. They were aligned mainly with the Black Consciousness Movement. So the organisations, including student organisations, that formed the two were also operating strongly at Turfloop. I remember we used to host people like Seth Cooper, he was a leading activist within SASO and AZAPO, Lybon Mabasa, Joe Phaahla, the current deputy minister of rural development, he was the president of the ANC alliance and movement, he frequented the campus quite a lot. A lot of union activists were also invited on to campus to address gatherings. So one walked into an extremely, a highly charged political environment. I was studying politics and started reading about Carl Marx and that started to make connections with some of the things emerging in the activities that were happening there.

I kind of really gradually entrenching my interest in politics and my following of political issues through that process. Unfortunately I couldn't even finish a year, half way through, around June, they had the semester

system, every six months you have to do exams, finish the semester and proceed into the second semester on condition you pass the first. So just as we were busy with our first semester exams, a student protest erupted and disrupted exams, there was a lot of clashes with police, it was a violent clash. I couldn't manage to write some of the papers that were due and therefore couldn't be accepted into the second semester. So basically I had to drop out at that time. I went back to this company

Facilitator: were you by chance shaped by Turfloop, or you shaped Turfloop?

Respondent: I think I was shaped by it, I think it played .., I was more of a learner than a teacher. There was little I gained from the first years of my employment in terms of really worker activism. I was just reading about unions, there wasn't a union in the company, so I was merely reading about unions than really active in them. So Turfloop really became a place where the intensity of student activism really took me over. I remember I used to sit in meetings, students would have mass meetings organised by the SRC, half way through the evening, some people would just retire, go back to their rooms to study or whatever. But I remember just indulging in the meetings for as long as they lasted, enjoying the debates, I was amused by the manner in which the students were informed and articulating issues and engaging in exchanges and debates, and trying to interpret our problems and linking them to the broader society. I just couldn't understand what was going on, I didn't believe what I was going through and I found it extremely enjoyable. So I really, I patiently just went through the dreams of meetings, the intensity of discussions, their long duration. So I started to buy some of the newsletters

that were sold my students, journals etc. I would just consume them, literally, page by page.

So the combination, on one hand of my first year, Political Science I if you like, introduction to Marxism etc., and the role of the student organisation, they really combined to provide me with a stronger kind of education if you like politically.

Facilitator: and on your return how did the workers ..(unclear) on the ground benefit from you?

Respondent: When I came back, then I found that there was a union

Facilitator: what had happened, according to hearsay, you had been away for some time, how did it get formed?

Respondent: I think a few more workers joined the company, I had left early 1983 and came back in the second half of it. So some workers joined early in the year and they .., either they were fired from other companies which were unionised and they walked in there and found the workers un-unionised and they started to talk about the need to have a genuine workers voice. And so they brought in NACTU, which was a COSATU rival, NACTU union in the steel sector. I found that .., they were still pretty much forming themselves, still organising, not yet well established. So there was a guy there Jackie someone, who was the main organiser, I had just met him, I had never met him before. The first sense I got of him was that he was like a nice guy who was just able to organise social activities and a function. The way he looked gave me that impression. But then in no time of me greeting him and chatting to

him from time to time he simply asked me whether I want to join them, they are forming a union. I then immediately asked him "what union"? SEAWUSA. I immediately said yes. I thought he meant SAAWU, it was a highly political union, one of the .., if you follow the history of unions, they belonged to the category called the populist union, unions that were linked to the ANC which were heavily political, that really workplace kind of rooted.

So because of that, they had a very huge profile, even when they were handling workplace issues, they would not handle them through the normal labour relations mechanisms. You meet management, you can declare a labour court case and settle it in that spirit. They would employ much more political methods, calling for boycotts on that company, using a lot of media propaganda against the company. So they waged a huge public war around wage dispute. So each time I read the newspaper, there's something about SAAW, so the moment he mentioned SEAWUSA, I assumed he meant SAAW and I've wanted to be into this organisation which has impressed me with the way it did things. Later on I realised it was not SAAW and then I said let's see what happens, it's still a worker organisation

Facilitator: but was there a chance for you to join SAAW?

Respondent: Look you could have .., I've since realised that it may not have been ideal to initiate any parallel organising effort. In any event I knew a little about SEAWUSA and was prepared to just have an experience of who they are and what they do. By virtue of just coming from school where I was beginning to learn about .., real systematic reading, prescribed, recommended, reference reading, that .., I was

really inspired by that kind of life of the various methods of learning, of building up your knowledge, through a formalised and systematic education process. So my ability to read documents, even while I read, I didn't even have a first year, whatever I managed to grasp would come in handy for those workers. I could read management documents, could read union documents, and try and interpret them and I also had been following some politics and would try and explain them and issues for them in some political way. So that immediately contributed to my election, I was elected as a shop steward.

Facilitator: Before that, what were your impressions of SEAUSA, you joined it thinking that it was SAAW and so on, but since you were there you more or less understood what they were up to and so on? What was their vision?

Respondent: I don't think they managed to communicate any clear long term vision, my understanding of a movement, especially a social movement. You will come across a nice discussion in the second chapter of this book. A social movement, it must bring people together around concerns, to say what you oppose, what affects you negatively or what you don't have, what you're interested in. It must be able to explain why you have a problem that you want to deal with. It must then show you the alternative. So I did expect that they would be articulating a clear alternative for workers in the country but I found that they were simply just articulating the problems. They were simply indicating that as workers you surely should have problems with your wages, with your conditions of work, like health and safety issues, treatment by white managers, so we want to bring you together into an organisation that would challenge them. So, it didn't emerge to me that there was anything beyond it, that

if you can just challenge the wrong things and create some improvements, that would be just about it. It may not necessarily be what they were about but I didn't come across anything beyond that.

Facilitator: were they just airport based or branch in that area or were there other branches across the country?

Respondent: they had branches across the country, but to be honest they were not a vibrant organisation. You would know less about them unless you went to them, they wouldn't lead .., they were not leading any major actions, they wouldn't call rallies, they wouldn't .., I mean their competitor which we later joined called MAWE had a very different profile. So this one was extremely quiet and silent and their way of engagement was very elitist.

Facilitator: so it was not like worker driven?

Respondent: It was not worker driven, they were speaking for .., just leading and speaking for workers not with workers?

Facilitator: was it ANC aligned?

Respondent: they were not aligned, they were .., well by virtue of belonging to NACTU predecessor, it was something still called CUSA at that time, Council of Unions of South Africa. CUSA as a federation joined the National Forum. So one was drawing the kind, some linkages with Black Consciousness. But from what I knew about BC at Turfloop, there was less of it emerging in the union. So my sense of that was that they were really apolitical, as a union.

Facilitator: Internally were they able to mobilise and fight on behalf of the workers, the day to day problems that workers had on the ground, you talked about safety, segregated toilets and so on?

Respondent: Not really, they didn't have good structures which we could interact with to articulate our problems and be helped. Like I say, they didn't have structures nearer us that we could go to, to present our problems, to be helped, to deal with them, they didn't look like .., I didn't even come across their organiser, not often, someone, an organiser for me should drop by the factory, check on us, ask about developments, how the union is growing, what issues we tackling, what support he can provide us. I actually knew about our organiser once I went to the first training, they did organise some training, but it wasn't even organised by them, it was organised by the union education project that worked mainly with unions linked to CUSA. It didn't work with the unions that were linked to the ANC or the other independent unions. So that education project would organise education programmes and ask the various unions to provide participants. So somehow our union managed to contact our company to train us. So I went there with a lot of enthusiasm. That was the first time I met the organiser, unfortunately we had a bad experience in which he had some involvement with one of our female shop stewards and there was an allegation that he tried to rape her. So we didn't have this guy when we needed him, the first time we meet with him he tries to rape our female shop steward. I really got sick of it.

They had a very .., they had a female general secretary. The interesting this, which is what I want to take up with Malehoko very badly, you see unions in the 1960s to the 1970s, were very heavily led by women. Women

organised workers including male workers in the unions, became leaders even at the highest level. So those days you still had a number of women, remnants of the old generation of women unionists who were in leadership posts. So I think from the mid 1980s they just fizzled out and unions were predominantly male dominated. So they had a female general secretary, Jane Hlongwane who had some background to her, but I wasn't sure she was able to run a union organisation at a time when the labour movement was growing very fast, the politicisation processes were deepening very highly. I think you needed much more sophisticated leadership skills. I'm very much cautious about passing that criticism because I don't want it to sound like I said women were incapable of providing for those skills. It's a topic for a different discussion but my sense was I didn't come across the weight of her leadership. Her deputy was a male guy, Thami Mtshali, he was a nice guy, he impressed me, he was sharp, able to argue, assertive, I got a sense that he did some serious studies up to some level. He was very articulate, but I don't think he behaved like an activist. He was a nice guy who could talk nice English and impress the employer and earn his respect from the employer but was not necessarily good at dealing with us. More often we would find him sitting with management than the workers and that was to really sum up the character of unions that existed in the NACTU for a long time.

Facilitator: Coming back to your election as a shop steward, how did it happen and why did it happen according to you?

Respondent: Okay, then came a shop steward election time, when a union organises you leave with some interim leaders. They normally are the first contacts of the union. They would automatically become leaders. But once the union has grown, has organised sufficient numbers, they

would normally demand that you have a proper election now and usually in the workplace context you divide the members according to the departments in which they work, you have to have constituencies. So you don't just have a mass meeting where you elect leaders, you elect them in some internal constituency system. So for my section, any how the guys who had kind of being observing that I've been to school, they see you reading they kind of got a sense that he would be able to represent us. I don't think initially they really had a deep sense of how really political I was.

Facilitator: so you became a shop steward under SEWUSA?

Respondent: yes

Facilitator: so where did you take your workers too, this was your platform now?

Respondent: The one thing that we were trying to deal with initially was to ensure that the union achieved a proper operating space. You know since you now had a certain threshold of membership, you can start demanding space in the company to operate, management recognising you, allowing you meeting spaces say during lunch breaks, that kind of thing. So we started to try and work on those kind of things as the first thing, to do our work properly we must be able to meet with workers, we must have .., winning the space to work and function as workers voice. And of course the company insisted that we must first sign some formal agreements, the Recognition Agreements as they would call them, that they wouldn't just have like a gentleman's agreement in which you verbalise the procedures that would govern your operation. They wanted

something in black and white. That's when we realised the company was extremely sophisticated, but outside our company, in various other branches they were really operating with a ..(unclear) driven labour relations policy and it was driven by a core-group of well trained officials, guys with some university background who understood the labour relations system very well, they shared notes, they managed to deal with militancy and they will be able to demobilise workers on the shop floor if they are not really careful and strong and really mobilised.

It was slow, we didn't really emerge very early in the system. The thing about that was, it was really, the moment we picked it up it fast tracked our learning process, how to deal with management, it becomes, it's an important skill. Some of the emerging unions have a way of teaching you communication skills, negotiating skills, planning and strategising skills. So they were putting up some of the systems in a very sophisticated, not saying yes, no, but in the following manner. But once you pursue the manner then you come across a lot of trappings isn't it, which almost amount to giving you nothing to what you wanted. And that is where I began to find the union extremely wanting, they were extremely patient, they were tolerant. I would have expected a union which would be a lot more forceful, militant. We would just go from one meeting to the next and take it leisurely, they were very lax. So we would just spend forever time going from .., running through the motions and in the process the members that we had started to be agitated, they wanted the union to start being useful to them. Like I said they were operating with very low wage system, so they wanted to increase their wages faster. We haven't even secured the agreement, the recognition but the workers want us to put money demands on the table. Usually those demands can be handled within the arrangements you have agreed with management

and they were not yet in place. But somehow, the company managed to provide us with some mechanism of those wages, they realised that the workers were coming strong and offered us some space to talk. And again they didn't want to take us serious, that go the workers worked up and they staged a protest that disrupted production

Facilitator: what year was that?

Respondent: I think that was 1985, so from 1983 we were going through a leisurely process of trying to seek recognition, 1985 the workers got fed up and sprang into some action. Immediately after that action, that was the action that was to radicalise the workers, they then realised that they have power, we can really shake the company. I think the company was ..(unclear) it just .., it was the beginning of a new life there. Management recognised that this workforces is not the same. The workers realised that it pays to act, and that was to change their life forever really. But at that time I think the workers started working gradually towards leaving that union and guess what, they didn't even tell me. They just decided to get MAWU into the factory because some of the workers had neighbours and relatives who belonged to MAWU and MAWU was militant and famous and so they kept on saying to them leave this bloody union, it is unhelpful, join MAWU. And so I think on one or two occasions they mentioned it to us as leaders and said "why don't you join MAWU" but I didn't know MAWU. The chairperson of our committee was a rep of MAWU before, but he never received it enthusiastically, and so I was a bit confused about the way forward. But the way the workers just brought it in, they started recruiting secretly, signing up workers into MAWU as we were belonging to the old union. And strangely all the members, the workers we couldn't convince into joining SEAHUSA joined MAWU even the ones

that we thought were extremely sheepish, we called them impimpi zamxashi, they joined. The entire factor joined, I think we had about 350 or 400 hourly paid workers, they all joined. And that was an amazing thing. So they told me the day when I was the last person to join

Facilitator: Tell me more about that process?

Respondent: I was shocked, I was never shocked by workers, they really amazed me. So the moment they realised ..., we had an action, out of the action we formed like a broad coalition. There were other unions that we were not aware of but picked them up slightly that some people were organising in another union, in SAWU, now SAWU was trying to make some inroads there and the unorganised workers. So we decided to form a coalition, just so as to avoid management focussing, we suspected management will come back hard on us, after that action. So to avoid us as SEAWUSA, people on the receiving end of the backlash, we started to form a coalition which presented a united front to management to pursue the wage negotiation process. But because at that time, it helped as an interim mechanism, from leaving SEAWUSA into joining MAWU and event the other union members then joined MAWU at that time. It was an unplanned process but something which just shaped as we got along. So I think some of the active workers in our union, used that moment to realise that there's essentially an absence of leadership, there's no leadership, here is a union which can't exploit a very strategic moment of workers having risen into action. It is not able to exploit it and build itself faster and properly, it is entering into coalitions and then arresting itself into yet another potentially longer process.

So I think they could sense it that the process might not go anywhere. Because they were not led by an organisation, there was an absence of leadership. So that's how I interpret the reason why they really moved out. I don't think the workers were backward enough not to pick up that vacuum and that only a strategic organisation was required to really step in and lead them, their sort of saviour. So they started signing up people at that time. I'm talking about 1985 and that's when the unity talks were really progressing so even in communities, again in the broader society, the role of unions was really picking up and like I say a lot of the workers within we worked were friends and relatives or ..(unclear). They got it then to that signing, especially those that were asking us why don't we go there because they are friends and relatives. They got the forms, they signed in the workers, no organiser was emerging yet again, until they were already done, then one guy from Thembisa came to me and said to me "my friend, we've been organising into a new union, MAWU, here is the forms, everybody else's forms", then he said guess what, "do you know the following workers" he was telling me about the ..(unclear) the impimpis, he showed me their forms, and told me about their comments when they were approached, that one guy apparently said "this is a union that we are joining now, not the sh* of yours. So basically that summed it up for me. Standing with him and him recruiting me, I'm his shop steward, he recruits into a different union, he tells me and shows me the work they have already completed, he shows me even the hard nuts among the workers that we couldn't crack but importantly and nicely he tells me their comments almost verbatim when they were recruited. I just said what is happening there.

So I started to think that there's a lot to respect about workers than their mere illiteracy, lack of education does not bring about lack of wisdom

and lack of strategic thinking. It comes out of experience and that really is what I appreciated about the workers there, and workers generally, so they recruited me, so I signed the forms, I didn't even think twice. I knew MAWU is a good union. So we all crossed to MAWU

Facilitator: you remained still a shop steward?

Respondent: that was an interesting thing, crossing to MAWU, MAWU at that time ..., so when we finally joined MAWU, when the process was completed, it was already 1986, remember the rumbling started 1985, but the process completed 1986. Now MAWU already, there was already COSATU because it was formed late 1985, so most of the time when we knew it they were still in the old union federation called FOSATU. So many unions together with FOSATU formed COSATU end of 1985. So in 1986 when we were then completing our migration to MAWU it was already now belonging to COSATU. So I had this kind of tensions with COSATU, I liked MAWU but I had tensions with COSATU, the tensions were from politicking. I was attracted to the Black Consciousness Movement, AZAPO, so I eventually joined AZAPO in my township, I was now in Mamelodi. From school when I came back I did not go back to Alexander I went to Mamelodi, but at school, as a function of the influence of the AZAPO student movement, I really got attached to them and so when I went into the community, after that, searching and looking out for people who belonged to AZAPO, I became an AZAPO member. You can imagine that I am joining a union which is ANC based, I was asking myself how do I live with the situation, the differences which were coming around, the involvement of whites, ANC allowed whites into its ranks, the UDM had whites. My teachings in AZAPO were questioning that. How do people who were benefiting from the system able at the

same time to be agents of changing the very same system. That is how AZAPO was trying to theorise the situation for us. And I believed it and then but my fellow workers were going there, I followed them. I liked unions, I liked the movement, I saw the need of it in the factory, I wanted unity.

So they called a meeting when the union was now inviting us, that is what was different about MAWU, we have joined them now, they recruit us in the factory, I've told the union office that we have everyone, they said once you have the majority come, but the guys didn't stop there, they ensured that they have everyone. So then the union said on this day come to the union office to have a general meeting, to introduce you to the local leadership, the organiser, induct you into the union, tell you about our mode of operation. It was what was never done by the old union. It was a different approach, but guess what, I didn't go. That day I was sitting with a .., I visited with a fellow AZAPO member to Soweto, we couldn't come back on time to go to my general meeting and I was stuck sitting with an elderly, a very seasoned AZAPO activist, they call him Phandelani Nefolovodwe, interesting guy, I like that guy, I still like him today, a nice thinker, sophisticated person, very relaxed, very sober, analytical. He was an ex-Robben Islander, he had come a long way. So we just bumped into among my connections of my AZAPO colleague. So when I was trying to push that we should go, he said to me where are you going. So I told him the workers in my factory have a general meeting, we joining a union. He said "do you know what a union is". He asked me to sit down and said to me "let me tell you about unions, and the reason ..(unclear) struggle. It was an irony that I was sitting in Soweto talking dielectrics and class struggle politics when my fellow workers were sitting in a meeting with MAWU being inducted, and they elected me not as a

shop steward but the chairperson of the shop steward committee. So it was just out of this world because I thought they never trusted me because ..., I mean by that time I think most of the workers already knew my politics and they already knew my attitude toward the UDF and the ANC. I would bring a lot of reading material to work, Steve Biko's general, I write what I like, Frank Talk etc. So I was really baptised into BCM. So everybody knew about it. So I thought they were careful with me for that reason, that I wouldn't be receptive to a COSATU, an ANC union and yet they elected me chairman of the shop stewards.

The meeting was on Sunday, then Monday I learned at the factory .., I was curious to know how did the meeting go? The ordinary workers who came towards me in the toilet were saying "hey you missed", it was like a conversion, they were converted to something else. Everyone stopping me and telling me about it, it was amazing, I was inspired. So I mean I had to call a meeting of the shop stewards, I was the chairperson, call a meeting of the shop steward committee, get a proper briefing, then they told me that unions has got a meeting every week, another new revelation about unionism, that union members meet regularly to talk about their issues. So the union in that branch had weekly meetings, this day all the shop stewards from all the factories in the industrial town come together after hours and there's a meeting an agenda, they go through the issues, they report their problems, the other workers listen and provide them with advise and go back and tackle the problems and report back the following week. And where the problems are more difficult for the workers, they organiser steps in, it was like alive.

Let me tell you one thing which struck me, this is one of the guys that I always thought he's an unsung hero, he is the guy you must meet,

Alpheus Makhadi, we belonged to the Kempton Park local of MAWU, he was the chairperson of the local branch of MAWU in Kempton Park, had meetings on Wednesday evenings or so .., the manner in which, he walks into a meeting holding his books, in the meeting hall there was a black board. He quickly takes a duster and cleans it up and write the agenda items there. They had an office bearer meeting where the agenda was formulated, and he writes the agenda for us. So all the shop stewards sitting there produces their notebooks, they write the agenda items and they know what is going to be discussed. He opens the meeting and immediately ask us to endorse the agenda, add/amend, an ..(unclear) process for those illiterate members of the union movement. Stupidly, I was shocked stupidly think .., I thought that guy was studying with UNISA. I have never seen that level of efficiency in a leader other than when a person had entered university education, it was professorial for me. It was nice. So those impressions were really to basically just entrench me into that set up, that's where I wanted to belong.

At the time I was reading a book by MAWU, the Chinese Revolution, I can't remember the title. I was reading about MAWU tactics of guerrilla, and heard things about when the enemy advances you retreat, when the enemy retreat you harass and when it retreats you advance. I was learning and asking myself how do I apply them in the workplace situation. So what I am reading and the environment in these workers movement were just complementing each other, it was strengthening my activism, my character as a cadre if you like and so we moved very fast now with MAWU, the organiser was able to talk to us and see us.

In fact then the new committee, myself, the chairperson, my deputy chairperson was a young guy, a militant young guy from Thembisa and he

respected no rule, he was reckless. The secretary was a clerk in another department, more sober and he liked order. So he was good as a secretary, he kept our records very well, took minutes and I don't know how to characterise myself, but more like .. , I was good picking up the different characters of the committee and trying to harness them. So they drove me into a situation in which to win some working harmony, an ability to function as a unit, those differences immediately stuck me as a unit, ..(unclear) they are well managed. And so I could see them, we meet there's this debate about ..., tomorrow we must strike and I say this guy is reckless, tomorrow we block the gates. And this guy is trying to ..(unclear) – so I had to move quickly to ensure that we start gearing ourselves up as a leadership and start harmonising our way of saying things and how do we lead, and what do we want to lead on, do we just say “strike tomorrow and strike the following day” – or do we have issues, where are we taking this.

What I was reading was able to start suggesting to me how to create order in our leadership role, remember I said how do you deal with the enemy, I am using those tactics, it means we must have an organised plan. So it means we must have an organised plan, I just didn't know how shop steward functioned and what drove their leadership but my ability to read those books was helping me in that context. So I managed to .., let us organise our own series of meetings, every day we meet as the leadership, and we just .., and then I realised I must go there with an agenda because if we meet what do we discuss, everybody will look at me. I realised in the first meeting that the agenda doesn't just drop from the sky, it must come from somewhere. So I started to plan my agenda and they would add and then we would say how do we build the membership. So we build the membership, so that is how we built a

system of running the union there which was heavily organised. At one point we were rated as among the two companies with a highly shop floor organisational system. It was amazing. We were able to do our own general meetings. Most ..(unclear) general meetings just to discuss ordinary grievances, but ours was organised in terms of say like, a political general meeting, annual general meeting where we report our programme for the whole year, those things are not done ordinarily.

We would invite guest speakers, Alpheus Makhadi came as one of our guest speakers to our meeting and he was really impressed with what he saw, and we would invite, the members would invite somebody from a neighbouring factory just overheard that we are having a general meeting with a guest speaker, he insisted he comes. And then we allowed him to introduce himself in the meeting and he just said "guys what I'm seeing here doesn't exist, it's amazing" he told us that he is going shock his members.

So we really developed, not just in terms of systems, we would call strikes, my reckless colleague who would say we strike now, on certain occasions we allowed it. We really pushed.

One other interesting highlight which I noticed, we started having female shop stewards. There was something about me that saw that the female stewards, in SEAWU a female shop steward we had as I said was nearly raped. She was assertive and vocal, you didn't have to empower her, she would empower men. But in MAWU she didn't come with us, she joined but didn't really come with us into leadership. So they elected a shop floor female as a shop steward. She was a little bit more overwhelmed by the whole set up, so she was an underdog among the

leadership and so once we established our things and our systems were up and running, I was able to focus on her. I was able to just to pick up the fact that as a team, we need to all learn certain things together, but how do we pick her up to our level so she can run, if we call a meeting today she can run the meeting. We plan it with the shop steward committee with her, plan the meeting but when we go there she will run it.

I couldn't get the formula right on how to empower this woman, she's a woman and comes with the sense that men are supposed to lead and suddenly the men want her to lead. But the things that allowed men to lead are not considered as being necessary for her to go through before she can lead. We just threw her in the deep end and I could see her battling. I said we planned the meeting together she must just run with it, she has seen how we do it she can do it the same way. We realised in the meeting that that was unrealistic of us, we had to have dialogue with the particular issues affecting her psychologically, that will prevent her to simply run smoothly with meetings, the way we were doing it. But I didn't have it, I didn't realise it. It's just that today when I look back, it surprises me that we tried to have some concern for gender issues in our own way even if it may not have been too significant. The other thing that really shocked me was, you see we started clearing a lot of problems in the factory and they required regular meetings. But we never stopped to find out the impact, the intensity of our activities on the workers, that we bringing them to meetings regularly, non stop. That is the thing that affects women, once you meet regularly they fall back because they have other responsibilities in their homes. But even this, some of the workers were staying in the hostels. There's no one cooking for them at home when we have late meetings, they have to cook when they arrive and so on. They arrive late. And so this started to take a toll on them.

Somehow one day when we met, we were reviewing, I asked the workers "what do you think about the frequency of the meetings" and one elderly Xhosa speaking said you need to call meetings when there's a need. He made the statement and never motivated it. Call meetings when there's a need. I remember that as he spoke I shrunk on the platform. I never thought about the fact that we call meetings when there's no need. What caused me to shrunk was the rippling fact that our regularity creates a whole meagre of problems and it's like I was just picking them up as he was speaking. I think it was normal, I'm young and I can live with these things, I go home, somebody has cooked for me, for them it was difficult. It made an impact on me, I will never forget it because it was like a striking example of how workers observe something even if they do not engage it but if you create space for them

Facilitator: they will hit

Respondent: Anyway I was then elected into a local, I became active in the factory and in the local, and in the local branch in Kempton Park, how I got elected was, I wasn't really speaking in the meetings, even with all my resources, reading MAWUISM but in the branch meetings I was always quiet. Frankly I had the disadvantage of language, the meetings in Jo'burg were conducted in Zulu and I'm from Limpopo and lived in Pretoria would not be fluent in Zulu. So it affected me a little bit but I also .., it took time for me to settle to their level. Remember I thought the Chairperson was a university graduate, the way he was organised and then I learnt later that he didn't even finish primary school. So the more I went there the more I started clearing the air and got to know them better. The guys noticed, one guy noticed that I'm regular but I'm having a book every day, someone noticed I'm reading a book. So to workers it

must be that he can talk English, he can write. So they immediately asked me to start improvising as a standing in for somebody who wasn't there, like the secretary to take minutes. Then eventually they said to me let's elect this comrade, this comrade is disciplined and he is always there, let's make him the deputy secretary. It wasn't in the structure they just created it for me in the structure at the time. Then they put me there and I accepted, this was in 1986 until 1987. I became the secretary, then I started participating as a local office bearer I participated in the regional structure, the provincial structure of MAWU. And so now my understanding of the union was much better. I started going into education, the head of education o education in the province drew me into the education structure, the provincial education structure. That was another interesting experience, because she's a white woman, Adrienne Bird. How do I work with a white comrade? I just couldn't understand how can these workers trust these whites. It was a question I had never asked them, but I can tell you you would never compose a delegation to any activity when the workers would exclude that woman in the delegation, they would stand up and say "don't forget, we've come a long way with her". And that is when I learned about other white activists that they had really worked with these workers in a way that won their confidence of the black workers. So the things that we were concerned in BC they were like ...

Facilitator: by then they were advanced a bit..

Respondent: but how can workers be non-racial when they are on the receiving end of racism on the shop floor, I just couldn't comprehend it. Here am I trying to analyse race and class and I can see the problems – remind me to tell you about the problem about women, in 1992, women

from the Women's National Coalition, the majority was African, we were to meet like white women like from the DA and ..(unclear) across parties. She had thought that when women were challenging patriarchy in the unions, it will differ from how they unite as women in their own coalition but then the racial issue comes there, the union women in the majority are African, articulating different interest, put them into contradiction with the white woman from the white political parties. Now I thought there's something we ..(unclear) with the workers that they would find it irregular to be oppressed by white managers but then love white officials in the unions. It didn't matter to them, the experience of working with these people, the work they did, the whole generation, remember that organisation called MUSAS

Facilitator: yes in the 1960s

Respondent: correct, I think they were really challenged by SASO. My reading, I'm still trying to follow my history very well, but when SASO emerged, remember the first thing, SASO started by doing a lot of community work, community programmes including organising unions. And so the first intellectuals to organise unions, apart from the ANC guys in the 1950s, were SASO

Facilitator: ja it was the same in the early 1970s, BAWU and so on

Respondent: correct, these white intellectuals found themselves extremely, firstly I was embarrassed that they claimed to be committed to the course of the poor of the black majority, yet they choose to operate in these exclusive white student organisation. So they had to run to .., when they formed their commissions, apparently that's what they did

which led to the Durban strikes and then the unions that emerged from the ..(unclear). They were reacting to the initiative of SASO and so they had to do better than themselves

Facilitator: outstanding

Respondent: they had to do better than SASO, but as you can imagine they were really resourced, they were at a high level of education in most cases, they had networks, they had resources, they could research, they could get information from overseas, they would move faster that's what assisted these workers to experience their value, when they serve workers they can really be resourceful in their service to workers. They are able to win issues clearly because they are able to work out their ideas and their way of engaging on the issues. So the workers impressed with that. That is not what an ordinary African organiser brings to them. We don't have those resources, the first people to have their laptops it was always the white guys. Those things are fundamental, they come with certain advantages in everything they do and I mean, one of the guys, Alec Irwin was already a professor when he joined the union, he already had a PhD in Economics. I remember asking him one day when I first met him, O asked him how did you educate yourself. I was struggling to finish an assignment for UNISA. I don't know how do you pass working for a union and asked him how he coped. He told me that he already had a PhD when he came.

The head of organising, it's the guy I respect the most, I have never respected anyone in the union movement is called Bennie Fatharof, he had a PhD in astronomy , he is busy with these telescope things in Kimberley or whatever. Whenever I met workers they mentioned him,

they had come across him. So I'm just saying, for me, I spent my entire political life failing to understand the value of non-racialism as a principle, feeling very much convinced that the BC principle is the only correct principle, but workers taught me non-racialism without explaining it. But as I say the more I came across their stories about how they handled a strike with Bennie Fatharof, how they .., the wars that they fought, the programmes they drove of building unions, their encounters with the police and etc. All those lessons of working with the white people convinced them that these whites were committed to the cause. So they are not asking a question anymore about it and that's when I come in and can't understand why. I was I was converted to their principle so I really never forgot about them. I think these white education officials recognised it in me, they noticed my initial reservations and she was cleverly taking the game at me – she was like coming to me, asking, giving me tasks, “can you talk about this, can you .., in our programme I want to have a slot for one of the participants to say something about .., can't you say something”. So she kept on at me and I could feel the pressure of her attention and I would say to myself “what the hell is this woman doing”. Later on I suspected that she was really bringing me into conflict with my political beliefs. Let me come across her as a, these people are reasonable, they are really committed, they are not dominating the black unions. So I don't know the day I overcame my reservations and now fully accepted and that I think now then facilitated, I left AZAPO because then firstly if I no longer had problems with non-racialism, what more separates AZAPO from ANC, the land question, then if you follow the land questions there are different ways of articulating it, initially I thought AZAPO was right, but once I started hearing about a conceptualisation of land issues under this thing of agrarian, I realised that there are more flaws with AZAPO conceptualisation, just to say “we want

the land back from the whites" doesn't say much. So I didn't find anything which was realistic to keep me in AZAPO and then I just shifted.

I got retrenched from my work in 1987 when MAWU was going to form, was in merger talks to form NUMSA, then just around that time, the company was busy organising and restructuring, they retrenched us. So I was retrenched, around March or earlier on, in 1987, then the local branch in Kempton Park advised me to apply for an organiser position in the union, there were openings for organisers. So I applied and became an organiser the beginning of May and I think it was the same month that we launched NUMSA, beginning of April, it was a month, then we went to the congress of NUMSA in May 1987. So I became an organiser, organised there until early 1989. I left them to join a rural organisation in 1989.

So three things I won't elaborate really on about my organising was that look I handled .., it was more exciting and difficult issues, I would set goals for myself, I want to lead a successful strike, not something that will happen, I must agitate it, I must plan , execute and win it. I must intervene in retrenchments, I must know how to take cases to court, I went to court alone, not .., today you go with a legal advisor, or even with a firm of lawyers. In fact in one of our fights when I was still a shop steward we went to the labour court with a firm of lawyers. We used to create so much havoc that even our unions started getting worried with us, they would ask an organiser to ..(unclear) reckless. Initially they were happy with us that we were bringing militancy but later on they realised this is too much, we had to be kept under check.

So when I became an organiser there are certain, I want to go to every level of a labour dispute as we call it, labour cases, you know whether you

do arbitration, mediation, conciliation, real adjudication, I can't call myself an organiser unless I've experienced all these things. So when it was not coming at me, I wanted to get at it, I want to create it, so I learned. So when they ..(unclear) go to them while I do it, initiating .., (unclear) that was my reasoning.

I also did an interesting disinvestment case, a company in Edenvale Manufacturing Water Pumps was owned through a British subsidiary but through an American Corporation, so at the time of the height of the disinvestment campaigns, this company was targeted and they were forced to, remember companies like Ford were forced to pull out at that time. So this company was discovered by the Anti-Apartheid Movement in the US and in Britain and they forced them to pull out. So they sold to a local company called Genkor. Then I had to be involved in the struggle to try and prepare us, it was tricky because the ANC always going to be the driver of disinvestment, but when they were disinvesting sometimes it had negative implications for workers because workers when the disinvestment was going on. But then they were selling to a local company and we were intervening to ensure that the sale must incorporate some of our demands, like that the recognition, the space is for the union that we want in the old company must transfer to the buyer. So unless you, in our mandate, insert those things into the sale agreement then you are stuck with the new owner and they start you afresh. They said "no you were recognised by them not me, you want to be recognised apply now". So we had to start the whole game again. So that is rolling back our gains which we didn't want. So we had to try and get solidarity in the unions in the States, that was my first encounter with internationalism, asking unions in another country to put pressure on management and communicate with them, giving them information,

using even like NGO's, so it was a very enlightening experience. That was the first time when I worked with Alec Irwin because the union had to try and put together a very competent team to work on that case. It was different to any other union case.

So I was just privileged enough to be the organiser responsible for the company, I wasn't because of anything other than I was the organiser for the company, directly involved, I was drawn in. So it enlightened me quite a lot and it was my first encounter with international management because one of the senior managers came to meet us and so how the unions overseas deals with unions, management deal with management, it was a breath of fresh air to what we knew here.

The other interesting thing about internationalism which I experienced at that time was I was organising a company called JIK, next to the airport again, just on the freeway to the airport. Interesting, I'm handling a case there, a worker, it was the first time we were coming across to what today are called new workers. Like the young workers with qualifications from Technikons, sometimes even universities, especially when they are artisans. So this guy was a member of my union, not bothered by the union, he participated in a marathon march in Durban. There was no way he could secure permission to participate in a march so he simply slipped out of work, like absent without authorisation. Management suspended him and wanted to nail him, they wanted to fire him. So he comes to me in the office and say my friend this is my story. I said how can you be so irresponsible, he said to me "baba, I've just bought a house (pause)", he had a child in a model C school, he needs this job. "How did you do such an irresponsible thing", he said to me "I love running". I represent a worker who is beaten by a white foreman, I represent really struggle cases,

oppression issues. So now for the first time I come across "I love running". So there was one thing about me which said "tell him to go to hell", it's a joke. But then when he was begging me, that prevailed upon my humanity. But it then allowed me to really listen to him, and understand him. I asked him how did you do this? He said I joined this marathon, I am a member of this local thing here etc. Things that are not work related. Then he is in marathon, they sponsored him and goes to Durban to participate there, he won and he was wearing a company t-shirt

Facilitator: marketing

Respondent: now those are the things ..(unclear) my engaging with it. So I don't forget it because I recognise it as one of my baptismal in dealing with issues of the young workers, of modern workers, they don't come with struggle issues, they come with ..(unclear). He wants the right to go and participate in the marathon and not go to work. But interestingly while we were handling the case, but I was too impatient with the process because I wanted to get out of the case as soon as I can to go to real issues. Then another shop steward started telling me about the fact that they have a head office in Britain and that they wrote the letter and sneaked it into .., like the product they produce, they produced things here that they ship to Britain, the value chain, the company ensures that they are manufactured here and shipped to Britain and they assemble it to build it into something there. So when they packed she mixed the note, we are workers in South Africa, we have joined a union called NUMSA it is helping us to deal with factory issues and problems, we have lots of problems, we want to share with you. Please reply. No name so that if it is intercepted they don't know who it was. So then they decided to send it with the material. So when I asked them why did you risk, what if it landed in

wrong hands, then the worker said "the product can only be opened by a worker, there is no manager who is going to open a product on the shop floor". It landed in the hands of the workers, from worker to worker. These worker can be creative. I would never have thought about it. It landed there, the workers indeed opened it, saw it, read it and handed it over to their shop steward. The shop steward replied and through the same system. A typical underground process, ANC, MK underground process. They sneaked back another material coming back, it gets opened by another worker, he sees it and delivers it to a shop steward here. But that one had disclosed himself, I'm a shop steward, here is my name we belong to this union, communicate with us to this address so that they no longer use that channel, just in case it lands on a wrong worker who can take it to management. So the first one worked by risk then from there they started communicating formally now sending letters to a different address. That sums up my thing about internationalism, the kind of internationalism you need. We were doing it through bureaucratic processes the workers just implemented it. So I learnt a lot about creativity of workers. So ja, then I left the union in 1989 and went a rural NGO

Facilitator: and the case of that guy did you win it?

Respondent: I won it

Facilitator: on what basis?

Respondent: on mitigation really, I think they became clear when we were planning the strategy that we are not negating the charge, you are guilty of unauthorised absence, you can't negate it ..(unclear) they didn't get it, they didn't even ask for it. So we not negating the charge but we

challenging but we want a lenient punishment and it worked. Our grounds, extenuating circumstances we used were that he had a good record, the fact that he went away unauthorised, doesn't take away that he is a decent guy, everybody knows that and we could convince them that all of you know he is decent, he respects himself, normally on a normal day he is on time, he does his work properly, he respects and co-operates with you, so there has to be a way in which you see this in its context, wrong as it is, he did it not because he is .., and secondly look guys, he went to do something and won, he didn't disappear to go and commit crime, he disappeared to run and won with your t-shirt, here is the photograph, in fact you must be happy, you must pay him for advertising you. I think it destroyed them, so I think they gave him a warning and he got his work back.

I remember there were cases where workers belonging to one company were under .., it was called Clashier bearings, head office in Durban branch here in Isando. They were underpaying the workers here and they were paying them better in Durban. The day when the workers joined our union I went there and picked up the different pay issues. I was so hard with management on a lot of other issues before we get to this one, by the time I got to this one, management was so fed up with me that they asked me not to even present it "sir please, don't even present it, consider it sorted out"

Facilitator: let's not go there

Respondent: It's the style that Mantashe uses, you know, "you beat the drums of war against the company especially where you are right so that you are shouting and your facts can flaw them". So when you come to

when you are weak, they are not sure you are weak because until then you were both forceful and correct. So it's a psychological thing that they just thought I was going to really mess them up. They sorted it out. This worker went to do a ritual in the rural area and thanked the Gods for helping him. I was like wondering, how do I win a case and the worker ..(unclear) in the court. That is the working class for you.

Facilitator: so in 1989 you went to join this rural company, where exactly?

Respondent: They called themselves, they changed their name, there was something, the new name became the Farm Workers Research and Resource Project (FRRP). It was based within the Social Anthropology Department at Wits, the anthropology professors were involved in researching forced removals in light of people who were removed under apartheid, if they were working on the farms. And then we extended it to really focus on farm worker rights, this thing called labour tenants, which is a different into a normal farm labour system. And so I went in there to try and strengthen .., work in their work .., their focus on farm worker rights. If you remember, farm workers, domestic workers and public servants were the last among the troop of workers to win trade union rights. And this really happened in the 1990s. We are talking about unions being formed in the 1970s it took more than .., if you start only with this current generation of unions, that you talking already 30 years of struggles and these guys just got it a few years ago. So we were really concerned with promoting the issue of labour rights on the farms. But how I got there it was also by chance. A student studying at Wits .., I must now disclose something interesting. I was recruited into an underground political cell by international Marxist, I subscribe to the teachings of Deon?? Trotsky, he is Marxist, Stalinist – I subscribed to the Trotsky's version of Marxism, so

some of their guys in the union recruited when I was an organiser and so I started attending their cells and reading and you know Marxism, that's when I read Leninon – then they said that I needed to become a professional revolutionary that meant doing revolution full time. I can't don't go to union and come back to their cell, but everyday I read, I do things relating to our network. Our network was to inculcate a strongly Marxist perspective to the working class struggles that were happening, either in the student movement, in the community struggle, the civics and the trade unions. So the sense about the fact that these movements were really led by the ANC and our sense that our ANC had an extremely moderate programme which wouldn't bring about fundamental change to the lives of the people, that they were going to be logged in to accommodation with capital and the old rulers and bring about a dispensation which would not necessarily give freedom. So we wanted fundamental change according to Trotsky's interpretations. So to analyse the struggles and work out our interventions, if we have an activist in the student movement, he will agitate for certain progress and activities that the students must undertake. The same in the unions and in the civics. So you could almost have a national programme which will bear the marks of what we were building, ..(unclear) struggles, inculcating more Marxist oriented worker education, or linking it to union education, so that you really maximise the scope of learning around Marxist and you give union struggles, community struggles, student struggles a heavy Marxist orientation which we thought it will come into confrontation with the mainstream politics of the ANC and its alliance, which was the SACP, so that was the whole thing.

So the whole preparation of those interventions required lots of things to be done, just what you must read, writing papers, delivering packs, going

to meet people, briefing people that must make interventions in various structures, it's work. So you needed a professional revolutionary. So I left to become that.

Facilitator: so that's what you became when you .(unclear)?

Respondent: this work for working for the rural NGO was just to provide me with a cover, so that .., because otherwise then the police would want to know what are you busy if you are no longer working in the unions. So there has to be something you're doing. And again that it was based at the university, which means I would have access to many things at university, I used to do my meetings at Wits, the people I must talk to I would invite them there. Sometimes I held numerous night long meetings there at Wits in the library. So I did that. There's nothing really ..., well a few spectacular things. One thing I can recall is it exposed me to the harsh conditions of lives on the farms. I remember going to Ermelo to meet some members of the farming communities that we were helping. There we found that a guy, you know the labour tenants, have you heard about labour tenants? So this guy, say you rearing cattle and you keep it on the farm, okay, in return for offering your services for free to the farmer's needs. Or either you farm with crops or with cattle, they were farming with cattle. He had a good flock, the farmers, they were fresh, the farmer became jealous and impounded them. And how they do it is they simply stamp the cattle in order to distinguish them. So they used to stamp them, so all the farmers stamps were having the same stamp, so the only thing he has to do is stamp them they are his. The whole kraal of that poor guy, the brought it up, he cared for it for ages, it is property for him, it's wealth, it's life

Facilitator: that's what makes him

Respondent: it's gone, nothing, it's empty the following day its gone. So this guy was giving us the story because we were sitting in a meeting and they were explaining the problems, he stood up, he was Zulu speaking, an elderly guy, he can't even see, his eyes were getting affected a little bit. So he says this farmer came he told me the day before that he is going to claim my cattle and I didn't believe him, so he came the following day on a horse, he just simply went to his cattle, chased him away on a horse, drove the cattle away. So I was running behind him and so the cattle was running, he is on a horse and I'm just running on foot, it's a mountainous area, there's rocks there, he says I was tripping over rocks and felling down, and shouting and running after my cattle and couldn't find them until they were all gone. He says when he goes to the police, the police stations are conservative, so when he got there they phoned the farmer who said he is lying. I have never seen his cattle here. And even when they went, he did a braai for them and shows them the cattle, they are all his they go away and forget about him.

So that was one of just the many stories that we were hearing that really shook me and I kind of realised that if we are going to have a government which was to deal with injustices and it has a moderate programme it is going to betray the aspirations of the people of this country and I think that was almost like confirming why I have to be a full time revolutionary. They come with other things but at least that. I didn't stay long because then the process of extending legislation became formalised. I interestingly got a call from the Department of Manpower under the old government, it was amazing thing, I'm sitting in the office there's somebody from the Department of Manpower, I am contacted by

the old government. They heard that I am presently working on labour rights on the farms, they want to talk to me about their intention to extend legislation to cover farm workers. I am wondering, "do I talk to the regime". I said okay, give me the details I will come back to you. Then I called a meeting of the whole office and the director of the office, they were like looking at me and saying "are you joking" I told them I got a call from the apartheid government they want to talk to me. Then we talked about it and said okay we will engage with it but let's start a process, let's not engage us, let's call all relevant organisations into a consultative process in which we outline what we need so that when we engage them we engage them almost mandated, it is us now as the broader movement of people raising human rights issue on the farms in rural area. It is a very nicely worked out strategy but then at that time COSATU was already advanced in terms of initiating dialogue with the government. The first process was led by what is called NEDLAC, this issue also landed on their table. So when the farm worker rights issue came I was invited, then the COSATU guys who met me there said "come back". And then I went back to NUMSA, Germiston now, became an organiser again, and then I was elected regional secretary, I went late 1989, 1990 they had a congress, I was elected the regional secretary, then I became a member of their National Executive Committee.

Facilitator: and then post-1994?

Respondent: I was re-elected to the regional secretary, what happened is, I was talking with a friend of mine called Langa Zitha, he is no more, he was until recently a member of parliament, he was in the past chairperson of the parliamentary committee on tourism and the environment. We said the transition is going to be a long one, and it is going to demand

resources, especially intellectual resources to deal with it. Things are going to be difficult for former activists who know the requirements, they want social justice in this country, but they are going to be caught at the level of their programmes, their ideas, to bring about that social justice. Our integration in the world system, our requirements to work with and within some of the global institutions, the reality of us really taking over a society which is functioning on market principles is going to create serious challenges for how you realise a poor perspective. So those things were clear to us at that time. Because I was with him, we were trying to drive a strategy, a development strategy for Gauteng, and just trying to work around there, what is a development strategy? They gave us such a mental treat, I remember one day sitting and someone was saying to us, if this is anything to go by, just thinking about what a development strategy is, what are the components of a strategy, how does it tick, if this is anything to go by then a lot of the ANC guys who are ministers, if they really work they sleep with their heads hot everyday because they must be consuming chunks of documents and documents that don't make sense them. You are forced to choose the easy way out. So we realised that. I wanted to go back to school now, I wanted to study in London. We thought we organised something it fell by the wayside.

So I resigned from the union again and when that studying project fell by the wayside, then I went back to my old rural NGO. My major focus there was, COSATU was forming a Farm Workers Union, so I focussed mainly in terms of helping them to form a union, analyse farming, ..(unclear) know where their vulnerable points are, where to locate their organising strategies and so on. So it became that. But I stayed there for about 8 months or so, the union was launched, started operating, but then the department of health called me. It was August 1995, they called me to

join the labour relations unit, there were lots of strikes by nurses at that time, 1995, the Gauteng health system had collapsed, so the MEC had no expertise to deal with labour issues in the office. So he head hunted some of us who worked with him in the unions. It was Amos Masondo, he brought us in. then I went and worked into the health department for a little while until mid-1996. Then I left them, I left them because I came here to this organisation to ask for money because I realised that the labour relations, the reason why we had so many problems, remember I said to start with, they unionised only in the 1990s. So the load of the problems at workplace level that were challenged by other workers were not yet challenged in the public service, which is why there were so many strikes.

Facilitator: that's where exploitation is

Respondent: correct, so you needed a huge intervention to deal with the problem, so once I understood what was happening and tried to develop a programme to deal with things, I went to hospitals, to understand how hospital management were dealing with labour issues, kayos. You would have a strike everyday, I couldn't understand why not. Public service workers get sucked into their public service mentality, life is slow, even workers are slow ..(unclear) they just get sucked into it, but then I realised that I needed a comprehensive programme and I wasn't sure that it would be funded by government, I came here to ask for money and then they offered me a job instead. I stayed here.

Facilitator: You also came to Gauteng so that you could come through for your siblings, did you do that?

Respondent: Yes, I don't know how to track it, sometimes painful, sometimes inspiring experience. Once I started working and earned my first wage, I grew up in a family in which, you know this thing about women, women in the rural areas, unlike township women, they may not necessarily see their husband's wage packet, whatever is needed they buy, so the women may never hold cash in her hand. So I remember me getting my first income and taking it as it was, part of it to my mother. She wanted to cry, it was an emotional experience, to receive money in hard cash earned by someone close to him, my son instead of my husband. And that was to be the start of a whole new thing for me. Then with my second income, I needed to sort myself, basically to renew myself, I had needs in terms of ordinary clothing, but then we had no furniture at home, we just grew up in the normal traditional rural life situation, there's no furniture. We didn't have a radio in my radio, until Matric I was sleeping on the floor with everybody else. And so I had to start taking care of those basic needs, the first piece of furniture, I remember my mum when it arrived, it even like caught the eye of the neighbourhood, something is coming, somebody is working there. My mum asked me repeatedly are you sure you will be able to pay up this whole instalment, I can't imagine the humiliation I will face if they come and reclaim it because we didn't pay. She said to me, please even if you don't send me a cent anymore, settle this debt. So I could see the worry she was sleeping with .., is it really here for good. So it used to shock me into like a sense of seriousness, I made sure that everything is paid up. It was the first piece of chair, you know in the rural areas, even if you buy the old kitchen units from Ellerines, and the table, the kitchen table, the kitchen chair and everything. Those became like dining room sets for you. I had to have that provided, it was like, I'm respected a bed there, a wardrobe there then I had to move on to the unit. So the first basics to now organise their life around a particular

grant that I will give, anybody going home I send a letter with money so that they can buy food with every month.

The way in which I was brought up, they could buy sugar and bread for the children to go to school. I remember when I used to go to school, we would burn sugar to make tea, do you know that technique

Facilitator: I've never experienced that one

Respondent: You take sugar, if you take it either on anything, or even on a spoon, you put it on burning fire, it melts and become a brownish liquid the women pick it up with a cloth and put it into a cattle and pour boiling water, it's tea, so the very sugar, you make tea with it and then you apply it to the tea to drink. So what we did with the tea, we will eat it with yesterday's remaining pap. Take the pap and tea and go to school. So those things about my younger brothers going to school having bread now I had to send money home monthly. They were still in primary, then they went to high school, my father took care of the one after me a little bit but up to a point I had to step in and start paying for his .., he went to do a plumbing course at a technical college, I paid for his fees, buying him clothes and giving him pocket money. I ..(unclear) his last year. The third one I had to take real like full time care, there were three others, all of them I had to really deal with them. When they finished Matric they were buying books, finished Matric, went to university – somewhere they get grants and a bursary there and I have to do certain things, do registration, buy books, then he gets accommodation somewhere, I pay for the room and give him monthly grocery, maintain him until he finished, he did his BA, he couldn't find work, he had to go back and do an education diploma, now he is working then the third one was also

working. It was funny, when this one finishes this one is knocking, when you finish with this one, this one is knocking. He also went to do N1 for plumbing etc., so I had to pay for his boarding things and registration, everything, the whole period until he did N4. He couldn't find work for a long time, so these two after their studies, they couldn't find work for a long time, so they had to stay with me again for yet another long period searching for work. But remember I had .., we don't have a house at home, we just lived in an old parents structures, so we had to build a tiled house, I had to try and do something which is lookable house, so that had to be incorporated in all these things. Paying school things, ordinary maintenance of the family and the building project. In fact in some instances, this history I was telling you about living here, going here, when I left the union, then they paid me my provided fund and I put it on my building project. I was waiting for a salary to buy material, it takes time, so when I resigned I got a lump sum from the provident. That is how I managed to finish my building project and other things that I had to do. When I went to work in the department of health, they couldn't put me on a normal salary because their salaries are low, so they put me on some piece rates, paying us fortnightly. So that depended on the amount of time I worked, so each time I worked long hours I worked them into the thing I got more. It was like survival tactics.

I can tell you you can't have a life, you just can't have it because if you want to have a life, you must abandon those things. You can't start a project of building three rooms, dining, sitting, kitchen, how many 7 room kind of house, you can't build it with a life of your own – it's impossible. If you have a partner it is going to cause tension over those things. So I basically not only abandoning my education, I then abandoned my

social life, completely. It's an experience I'm not ashamed off,. It's my history, that's where most people come from

Facilitator: when you look back was it worth it to be involved in union activities?

Respondent: in a number of ways it was, I think personally it developed me, I never managed to do my .., after getting out of Turf, I never managed to go back, I tried here and there to try and study but the force of labour struggles and other community struggles, really kept on displacing me from my education project. But what I learnt, I mean I can read a PhD today, and will never finish, I have never done level 2 course of university, can read policy documents and analyse them, and see gaps in them to some extent, not as good as a trained person can, in my way. So I think the trade union movement and struggle personally they advance you, they develop you. I think I'm happy with the role they played as the terrain in which I was involved, in terms of the freedom of the country, in terms of the new systems we have, some of the policies were influenced by them, the leadership we have come from them, so I .., my individual roles, I mean you can say they were from losing a job here and improved people's wages there, those things, I'm not sure they matter much beyond the overall picture of the .., the values that we were introducing, there are those little achievements, practical tangible achievements but they were not the goal, the goal was to fight for a value system which do not create the necessity of the struggles, the oppressing conditions. We have contributed, we have talked about alternative systems in society, governance issues, democracy issues, social justice issues, I think we played our role. And so there are many ways in which I was happy that I was part of the institutions that were doing that. I

regret the fact that I was not disciplined enough, I think many of my colleagues managed to finish their studies while we were doing the same work, Gwede Mantashe finished his degree in the unions, he now has a masters, he never took sabbatical. So there are many ways in which I've not been as realistic as one still could have been to have tried to study especially with the experience you gain. Certain studies may not have given you the trouble that they normally do if you are like a young learner. About that much I regret quite a lot. I still want to see how I can salvage it but I'm so much attached and welded to this development, even today I'm still like "government has just released a trade policy, how do I, my work here is with the unions, I'm not really out of it". I'm just out of their actual formal employment but I'm working with them to make an impact out there.

Facilitator: thanks for your time, I'm grateful

End

Collection Number: A3402

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

PUBLISHER:

Publisher: Historical Papers Research Archive, University of the Witwatersrand

Location: Johannesburg

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