

Ndosi Shongwe

Facilitator: This is an interview with Mama Ndosi Shongwe, we are in Tsakane, the date is 1 April 2012, interview is done by Brown Maaba, you can combine languages. Please tell me your family background as to where you were born, your family background, how you were raised, issues around schooling and how you ended up in the labour movement.

Respondent: Thanks very much Brown for the opportunity and also for a refreshment and reminder of my life in the labour movement. I was born in Brakpan Old Location, I was brought up by older people, my mum's aunt and her partner. They were elderly at the time. We then moved from old location to Tsakane in 1963. And I was very young at the time, but when I am told about how we left the old location, I realised that there is a need to get involved in the struggle. I am told my own father also used to fight for people's rights, he was not happy with the way we were moved from one area to another. Moshoeshoe street in the old location was populated by policemen, my father was the only one who was not a policeman in the neighbourhood. When rent issues were discussed, my father together with the police decided that they are going to boycott the rent, they agreed but when the time came for the boycott they didn't boycott the rent. He was the only one who boycotted the rent. A couple of months later my father realised that all of them had been paying the rent and we had to be kicked out. Our belongings were thrown outside and the house was locked. This is when he realised that he was the only one who boycotted the rent. When he checked the records, everybody was up to date. My mother's aunt used to work for a business person in Brakpan, very well known. This happened around the 1960s. When the employer went to negotiate to pay rent on our behalf, the municipal office refused and said that my father was a bad influence and that he will be given a house in Tsakane.

When we arrived here in Tsakane, my father was self employed. I remember one day we were at home painting, a policeman arrived on a bicycle, he whistled for

my father to come out of the house. When my father came out he asked "who are you whistling to?", he said to you. My father then said how do you whistle to me in my house. There was a long argument and my father attacked the policeman physically and the policeman left. Later on, he started telling us about how they grew up. This is when I realised that there's a need for people to fight for their rights. When I went to high school, we attended school in a primary school building, the primary school learners would attend from morning to 12, we would then attend from 12 to 5. Other learners had to learn in church halls, we did not have enough schools. At the time we used to wear pleated school dresses, my uncle brought me a flared school dress. One of the teachers asked me why am I not wearing a dress which is not pleated. I told her that they are the same, I didn't have a pleated dress anymore. We fought about this, I was in Grade 8 at the time. We had to go to the principal's office. I then asked for the school uniform policy. Principal Hlatswayo told me that there is no policy in place and that there is no problem with my dress as it is part of the uniform.

Other learners started wearing similar dresses. By the end of the year the whole school started wearing the same dress. The dresses were much nicer and neat. From there in 1976 when the riots started, I was still at school. There was a bar next to my home and as you know most bars were vandalised. There was a believe that having bars in townships create a problem for families and the community because the men used to gather in the bars and not attend to their families and/or community issues. I was also one of the people who vandalised the bars. I was 16 years old in 1976. Although I did not know what I was doing at the time, I joined in.

Later on my father passed on in 1979 and this is when we lived with my mum's aunt. She was much older at the time, she was unemployed, there was no one to pay for my education and I decided to go and look for a job, there was no one to look after me.

In 1980 I was employed by Mineral Binders. Employees started work at 6 in the morning and knocked off at 12 midnight, there was no transport, the employer had organised a truck which would transport people to and from work. The truck can deliver you as late as 3 in the morning but at 6 you are expected to be back at work.

This went on and on, we met a gentleman who was being organised by FAWU. The meeting was held at Xosa, we were invited to the meeting. We arrived there and discussions were held, I realised that FAWU is not relevant to us, it is more for food people, we needed a union that dealt with people working with chemicals and paper. After the meeting, Baba Zulu was also there. We discussed this with the organisers and informed them that our industry is chemicals. They told us they will find someone who will organise us affiliated in the chemicals industry. They took our contact number. Comrade Bheki Ntjalintjali called me at work, there were no cellphones at the time, he called me on a public phone. I was called to the phone and we arranged to meet. I met with comrade Bheki, they invited us to their local meetings in Kwa-Thema.

Comrade Bheki explained to us how difficult it is to form a union in a company which does not have a union in place, and that for them to represent us they will need 50 plus one employees to join as members. We must recruit secretly and not inform the employer. I told him that I will be able to recruit people because I was in the first aid room and also worked as a supervisor. They gave me forms, I would hide them in the Sowetan newspaper. I then organised a team of people which I briefed about unions. I remember there were 6 boys and Lebo who works for NUMSA now. We agreed that we will start organising people but we will not give them forms to complete, we will complete the forms and keep them so that there is no proof should the employer find out. We didn't trust the workers. So we organised 50 plus 1, the union had written a letter to the employer and informed the employer that we have 50 plus one members. We requested a meeting. The employer called us all to a meeting, he stopped production for this meeting. He wanted to know who brought the union into the company, he asked us one by one. We had informed the

workers that they should not admit that they are union members, how the union came into being.

We all denied until the union met with the employer. The meeting was held an agreement was signed. We then had to elect representatives for the workers. The workers elected me as a shop steward. We were four shop stewards, I was also appointed as a senior shop steward. That was the first group of shop stewards. I was also the first woman who was also a senior shop steward. I will also represent the workers at regional meetings of the union. We were now union members, shop stewards attended shop steward meetings. The chemical union chose me to go and represent ..(unclear) on behalf of the union. We then had to union representatives to represent black people in parliament. Comrade Elizabeth Thabede was part of our union, she worked for Plastic Gungle in Germiston, she was the Treasurer of the region.

In 1994 Elizabeth was sent to parliament, she had to leave the position as a Treasurer, then I was appointed as the Treasurer to replace comrade Thabede. I used to sit in national meetings representing our region.

What I will not forget is when we sat in Centralised Bargaining Agreement as a company, the union had resolved that we are now going to Centralised Bargaining, employers resisted to sign agreements. I came up with a strategy which I did not plan with anyone. I decided to select 5 workers, after receiving reports from different companies, some refused to sign and others had signed. Ours refused to sign. We had resolved that we are going to pressure the employer to sign the agreement. After selecting the 5 people we decided to do a sit in in the company, but we had to inform the workers because if we are doing a sit in we need everybody's support and we must all sleep at the workplace. We had a general meeting and briefed the workers on this, the sleep in, so that the employer can sign. We had exhausted all avenues and it was clear the employer was not prepared to sign. The workers agreed and we asked them to all inform their families that we will

be staging a sit in during the course of the month. Some of the workers informed the employer about our plans, the problem is he did not know when we were planning to do the sleep in. So he was on guard. Just when the employer thought we were not going to do it, we did it. Three people clocked in and blocked the doors and then we all come in and clock in. Everybody left the office and the workers, walked back into the offices. The agreement of the Centralised Bargaining was signed at midnight. After we went back into the offices, we called Bheki to be ready when the employer decides to sign. Comrade Bheki arrived at the workplace at 10:30, he stayed in his car until midnight, that is when the employer signed the Centralised Bargaining. Those are some of the things that happened.

After that things changed, the working conditions were better, let me indicate that our company was liquidated in 1999, but I left the company in 1997 because I was fired by the employer. The union took the case to the CCMA from 1997 to 1999 early. When we were supposed to go for the final hearing, the employer shot himself. That was the end of the owner. The company belonged to his family but he had partners. The company was liquidated late in 1999. That was the end of the company.

At the time I was part of the Brakpan Town Council, of the Councillors. If a councillor did not have a car, he/she would be fetched by the council car/Metro Police. When I arrived at the meeting I was told that my previous employer wanted to know why am I being collected by a municipal car. At the time the employer did not realise that I was a councillor.

Before we became councillors, in the first local government elections, discussions and nominations were held. My employer already knew that I'm an ANC member. Mr Peter Bird who was in management told me that there is no way the ANC is going to rule the country. I said to him let us wait for the elections and see. He then said to me if the ANC takes over I will give you my office and car keys and you will be part of management. The elections were held and as you know we won, I went back to

him and asked if we can take the discussion further based on our previous discussion. He was furious. The lady who made tea for us told me to leave him alone because he was too furious. That was the end of the discussion.

My schooling background: I studied until grade 10 because of lack of funds. That is why I left school and looked for a job.

Facilitator: What a story. Let me just go back a bit. When you took over as one of the first women shop stewards, what needed to be done. You talked about the long hours, which were crazy. What else needed to be done to transform that company?

Respondent: Fortunately the union had a policy that clearly stated that workers should work only 40 hours a week. Then the long hours stopped immediately. If you worked from 6 to 12 you would be volunteering and you would be paid overtime. The union resolved that workers should be educated. For instance you get paid for overtime but this is strenuous for the worker, you do not get enough sleep, if production is not enough you are taken for a disciplinary hearing. So at the end of the day it is not worth it, the employer didn't care whether you worked long hours or not. We embarked on educating workers. People did overtime on their own accord. The hours were changed, we started working at 07:30 and finished at 4:30, gradually the employer introduced shifts.

Facilitator: Generally how were the working conditions?

Respondent: The working conditions were bad, the environment was dusty and there were chemicals. We did not have enough masks, we had to use one mask for the whole day, from 6 in the morning until midnight. We were not supplied with enough masks, the uniform we were not allowed to change it, we used one uniform

from Monday to Friday because we were all given one. The union negotiated that workers should be given at least two masks per day, and we all had two sets of uniform so that we can change twice a week. The company started washing the uniform for us, in the past we were washing them ourselves.

Facilitator: Did any of the workers become sick at a later stage because of the environment they were working in?

Respondent: Some yes. I remember I handled a case of people who had TB, because I also worked in the First Aid room, I would collect TB medication from the Brakpan clinic to make it available for those employees that had TB. The challenge is I was not sure whether they took the medication during weekends. I would make sure that they get their medication whilst at work, I just couldn't control whether they took the medication after hours and weekends. I monitored them only whilst at work. Others died. Most of the people who worked for that company have passed on.

Facilitator: Really?

Respondent: Yes

Facilitator: But did management change some of the things?

Respondent: Yes they did. We were now changing masks twice a day, two musks at a go, so a worker will take four masks per day. First two in the morning and the next two after lunch. We also had a health and safety committee which represented workers.

Facilitator: What was the general concern around safety and health?

Respondent: There were concerns, hence we established the Health and Safety Committee which represented workers. After that the union organised the Department of Health to come and address workers on health issues, we also had TB experts visiting the workplace to ensure that people were taking their medication. I remember Riba used to come to our workplace to educate workers on health issues.

Facilitator: What about benefits, did you have any benefits as workers?

Respondent: It was bad with benefits. My first year, my December salary I was paid R18, this included bonuses. After a while things changed. We were paid R130 per week, the highest paid workers were paid R480 after we insisted on the R1200 per month as the living wage. The union insisted that everyone be paid a living wage. Everybody was getting a living wage before the company was liquidated. The employer used to deduct pension fund from the workers and not pay it to the pension fund administrators, he also didn't pay his own pension fund for the last three years before he committed suicide. This we found out after liquidation.

Facilitator: So people lost out?

Respondent: Yes

Facilitator: But were there ever strikes?

Respondent: Yes we had a two week strike for salaries. After two weeks the employer came between me and the workers. He said I was the instigator, and told

them that the union has bought me a house, I also do not pay rates and taxes because I'm a member of the ANC. The workers did not take him seriously, the strike continued until our demand was met and implemented.

Facilitator: What about benefits for women, for instance maternity leave and other benefits?

Respondent: Through the union we were able to achieve this, before we did not have such benefits. Women were granted 6 months maternity leave, husbands were also given 2 weeks paternity leave. We also protested for our children, we wanted our children to benefit, we brought our children to work. The employer requested the shop stewards to ensure that the children are taken home because the environment was not safe for children. We refused and insisted on having a crèche at work, the children should be given breakfast and the people working in the crèche should be looked after. The employer agreed, the following year we were granted a day for children, on 1 December all the children were driven to the zoo. In the end we had good benefits.

Facilitator: What about annual leave because you used to work from 6 to 12, did you have leave?

Respondent: Yes we did, depending on your service, if you've worked for more than a year you qualified for 3 weeks leave.

Facilitator: Were you able to have control over men as a woman?

Respondent: Surprisingly so yes I was able to control them. One of the guys who is now a teacher, Chad, his name is Moferefere, he used to work for us temporary

during university holidays. I was able to deal with the difficult people, Moferefere was really moferefere like his name. He came to me and asked me to disappear and not respond to management, he asked me not to respond. He was supposed to sign for the uniform, he just put a cross where he's supposed to sign. The lady who managed the uniform had to call management and inform them about this. He refused to sign. I was then called to the lab, I did not go for an hour or so. On Fridays we used to go home early, if I do not go it is going to be a challenge for me if Moferefere has not signed. When I arrived and asked him he didn't sign, we spoke in our language and he said "I will sign now" - he told me that he wanted to rub the employer the wrong way. I then said he is going to sign, and asked him to tell me what is the problem. He said there's no problem but he will sign. I communicated very well with the men. If there was a problem, I would talk to them and they understood me very well. If someone did not want to do his work when I confront him he will tell me what his problem is.

Facilitator: What about victimisation, you were one of the people that introduced the union and you worked there for quite some time? Did the employer victimise you in any way?

Respondent: That is why I left before, I was targeted because my last day at work, during the day things were normal, but as we were about to leave as a group, Mr Gist stood outside the gate for me and gave me a letter in a white envelope. I was dismissed with immediate effect. Workers arranged a strike the following day. I then asked them not to go on strike and that the union will handle the matter. I was victimised but because I had some education and understanding of certain issues, I was able to manoeuvre in the situation. I was representing workers and this was not a personal issue.

Facilitator: In terms of training, did you receive training as a shop steward?

Respondent: Yes I went to a lot of training programmes, maybe the training made me stronger. Training in terms of affiliation to the chemical industry, also in terms of COSATU as a federation. COSATU encouraged that women be appointed as shop stewards, the focus was on training female shop stewards and ensuring that they are empowered. This empowered me to an extent that currently I am representing the community.

Facilitator: Was there a connection between township struggles and worker struggles?

Respondent: Yes because COSATU recommended that shop stewards should join political organisations, people were encouraged to have political homes and also participate in MDM structures: SANCO, Civic Association – shop stewards were encouraged to be part of the associations. It was important for shop stewards to understand people's social problems, the only way to understand them is by participating in community organisations/struggles. I remember comrade Paul Nguna, he was the one who pushed me to make sure that I attend community meetings. He would follow up and encourage me to attend meetings of SANCO, SACP, ANC and other similar organisations. That is how we became members of SACP, ..., the only organisation I did not join was SANCO. I participated in their meetings but did not see a need to join them – being an ANC member, I was appointed in central branch leadership. I wanted to give other people an opportunity to join.

Facilitator: Were there threats maybe of being arrested maybe because of your involvement in unions and so on?

Respondent: We would be arrested for a few hours and after negotiations we would be released, the police did not lock us up for a long time, I think they were hoping we will reconsider.

Facilitator: The fact that the company was liquidated in 1999, did people see it coming, the workers and others or were they taken by surprise?

Respondent: They were taken by surprise, that the company is closing down and is liquidated, the company owed banks and suppliers.

Facilitator: Where did the new owner go wrong, he took the company over from his parents?

Respondent: Yes he took over from his parents. COSATU informed its members that should they realise that a company is struggling, as workers they must become partners and ensure that there is work – but because generally employers looked down upon black workers, this did not happen. We did realise that the company is battling to make ends meet because suddenly the employer introduced short day shift, others worked 3 days, 2 days. We approached the employer and offered to buy shares on condition we are represented on management, the employer refused. But it was clear that the company is going bankrupt, the employer must have felt that there is no way a black person can assist.

Facilitator: And eventually it went down?

Respondent: Yes

Facilitator: So you all lost your monies and so on?

Respondent: We did get something, I remember I received my provident fund. We were saved by the provident fund because it was controlled by the union. Employees who were on the pension fund did not get anything because pension fund stipulated that you wait until the age of 55 before the funds were paid out. Some employees refused to join the provident fund and remained on the pension fund because they were not unionised, about 5% of the workforce were not unionised. They regretted afterwards. We did however lose 3 years contribution, including his which he did not pay into the provident fund account.

Facilitator: What about the CCMA case?

Respondent: The case was thrown out and the liquidators took over, there was no longer a need for us to continue, I had lost interest because nothing was going to come out of it.

Facilitator: Within the chemical industry, were there other women who were active?

Respondent: Yes as I earlier indicated, Lebo who works for NUMSA now, there's a booklet which was published by NALEDI, we were featured in the book, she was also a shop steward. The booklet: Labour Pain, it highlights the history of women in the union struggle.

Facilitator: Do you think your involvement in union structures helped you acquire certain skills that are now applicable to your current work as a councillor?

Respondent: It assisted me a lot, there is no school like the trade union movement. We became councillors without getting any training, we were able to do our work before we were trained because of the skills we acquired. The training empowered

me a lot. I learnt how to deal with community issues because of the training I received from the union.

Facilitator: What do you think is the future of unions in this country, what do you think? Where do you go to from here?

Respondent: We are always discussing the future of unions. I think the problem nowadays is that union representatives do not join the union to assist workers, they join for their own personal gains through the union, they use the union as a ladder to success. Unions might not exist in the near future, if people were to understand what the role of unions is they will realise that there is no longer a need. Workers have rights now and do not need to be represented by union representatives. All they do is take subscriptions and not representing the people. Union representatives are fighting their battles for their own personal gains using the worker's problems. I don't know what can be done because even in COSATU, the people who represented workers in the past also realise that the current unions are not as effective as before, they are more like political organisations. There is no difference between the political organisation and the labour union organisation.

Facilitator: So will you eventually close shops as unions or will it continue like this, being used by people for their own political gains?

Respondent: Until there's a change in policies, if new policies are not introduced they will definitely close. If COSATU can lead the trade union alliance and refer to the previous written material and learn from it, understand the aims and objectives of forming trade unions in the first place. Currently workers are fired and have no representatives to represent them, the representatives have personal issues with members, they seem to forget that members are paying subscriptions. We also had personal issues in the past but what we agreed on was when you arrive at the company gate you leave your personal issues at home and do what you came for.

If you do not have a good relationship with somebody you put that behind you, you communicate with this person. Personal issues were dealt with away from the workplace. Union representatives would represent workers even if they were not in good terms. But now ..

Facilitator: It's no longer the same

Respondent: Maybe it's because of democracy, I wish we had the previous representatives today in a democracy – we were oppressed politically and maybe that is why we performed the way we did. We were also oppressed in the workplace. Now we have democracy and things are like this now.

Facilitator: So was it worth it to take charge or to be involved in unions?

Respondent: It was worth it, if I was not brave, I don't think that workers would have the benefits they have today. I always thank God for giving me the courage to continue assisting in unions, and the way we changed people's lives.

Facilitator: Anything that you think is important that we did not talk about?

Respondent: No I think we covered everything.

Facilitator: Any closing word?

Respondent: Just to say I would like to thank Wits for doing this research so that the history of unions is recorded. We need to document our history, black people

generally we do not document. I am proud to have played the role I played in the struggle of South Africa.

Facilitator: Thanks very much for your time

Respondent: Okay.

END

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