

Nomthandazo Mahlangu

Facilitator: This is an interview with Mama Nomthandazo Mahlangu, we are in Bloemfontein, the interview is done by Brown Maaba. Mama thanks very much for your time, you can speak any language you are comfortable with. Please give me a background as to where you were born, how you were raised and how you ended up in union structures?

Respondent: I was born in Wattville Benoni on 31 September 1954. I first schooled at the St Joseph Catholic School in Actonville. From Actonville I had a baby and had to leave the Catholic school. I then started studying through correspondence in Boksburg and then corresponded with Damelin. I did the secretarial course and came to Bloemfontein, continued with Damelin. I did my Matric but did not write exams. Our union brought the Natal Technikon and we studied through the Natal Tech, they came to our offices and we attended classes at work. We studied communication, and many other subjects through Technikon. We passed at the Technikon. Before I came to Bloemfontein I worked for SA Dried Fruit in Benoni. I worked there from 1980 until 1983. I left in 1983, I was a shop steward then and I was chosen to work in the office, at the time the union was Food and Canning Workers Union. The offices were in Johannesburg at Jeppe and Simmons Streets. Things were tough at this point in time for Food and Canning Workers Union – the workers subscriptions were collected in cash by the organisers. We would have to go as early as 5 in the morning to collect subscriptions from the workers before they knock off at 6 in the morning and then collect again from the day shift workers. Subscriptions were about 30 cents at the time. Sometimes we collected subscriptions on Saturday morning. I was working with Maria at the time. Maria Hendridge had taken over from Neil Aggott who died in 1982.

In those days one had to do everything, you were an administrator and an organiser at the same time. Maria resigned from the union, I remained with Grace

Mabulelong and Kleinbooi Mokwena. Grace was from Atteridgeville and Kleinbooi was from the Vaal. The three of us worked together for a very long time. We didn't have any branches in those days, an organiser would travel everywhere, as far as Klerksdorp. Sometimes we organised at night at bakeries – we had to use many methods to recruit. I also recruited at Tongaat.

From 1992 I stopped working in Jo'burg in the City and moved to Germiston City. When I started working in Germiston we had merged and Germiston fell under Springs. We merged in 1986 with RAAWU and Sweet Food and formed FAWU which was called Food and Allied Workers Union. After Germiston I was moved to Springs and then back to Germiston, after Germiston I left and came to Bloemfontein in 1992. I was then appointed as the Regional Administrator to date I am still here. We do not have regions anymore but we have provinces.

When I was in Jo'burg when AWB was formed, there was a woman's march in Pretoria. This is where we were told about AWB, a fight erupted and the police were called and they delayed to come. COSATU locked us in their offices so that we can be safe. There was a lot of shooting. Later on the police came and told us we can leave and that it is now safe to get out. We then left and came back Johannesburg.

In 1998 there was a big strike SARU, we were locked up at COSATU House. FAWU was represented by two people, the administrator and myself, I was an organiser at the time and other unions. The police beat us up. Shivron Thompson came and bailed us out from John Voster.

Women's meetings, people like Thoko Didiza, Sister Ngcube, Jessie Duarte and another woman who died in a car accident driving from Cape Town. They would call women's meetings regularly. During the time of the UDF during registrations we were also there. We attended most of the meetings.

Facilitator: Just to go back, you said you got pregnant and had to leave school but you went on to study. It seems you were determined to study. Where did the drive come from?

Respondent: Our parents were very strict, I was the first born in the family and my parents wanted me to be educated, it was unfortunate that I became pregnant. In our days we were not taught about teenage pregnancy and the birds and the bees.

Facilitator: How did you end up at the South African Dried Fruit?

Respondent: As indicated, I was elected to work in the office of Food and Canning

Facilitator: how were you elected to be a shop steward, what did the workers see in you?

Respondent: The workers saw a potential in me because I was one of the people who showed an interest in the union, I wouldn't go to lunch, I was interested in what is happening around me. If there were problems on the shop floor we would approach the employer and discuss with the employer.

Facilitator: what were the challenges at South African Dried Fruit in Benoni as a shop steward?

Respondent: There were a lot of challenges, our manager Mr Christin wanted everybody to clock in by 6:55, at 07:00 he takes the clock cards and keep them in his office. If you arrive after 7 there are no more clock cards. We were earning R15 in those days, we were not allowed to chew gum, if you do you do not get the bonus, meaning you will earn R10 not R15.

Facilitator: Were those things dealt with eventually or did things remain the same until you left?

Respondent: By the time I left we had fought for our rights, money was better at the time, the negotiations were held in Cape Town, all SA Dried Fruit got together, the Wellington Branch, Benoni Branch and another one which was somewhere in Cape Town I can't remember the area.

Facilitator: what were your achievements in this industry, Dried Fruit and what were the failures?

Respondent: I would say our achievement is getting the workers to join the union, and them realising that without the union they have no one to represent them. There were a lot of problems, dismissals and other things, the union assisted them because the dismissals stopped. Supervisors would use their powers to get the workers fired for no good reason. These things stopped happening and when a meeting was called all the workers would attend. The other thing we achieved is that shop stewards were united during negotiations, they were united and the employers did not like this.

Facilitator: were men afraid to join unions?

Respondent: Men were members but did not want to the employer to know that they are members, they would pay the subs but wanted to be in the background. The reason they joined unions in those days was for protection, if the employer wanted to dismiss them the union would speak on their behalf. Some did not even want to attend union meetings because of this.

Facilitator: Why was that the case?

Respondent: I don't know but I think others joined because they thought members were given money. All women joined instantly, including the supervisor

Facilitator: but in general were people willing to join in the early 1980s, or were others worried about their families and husbands.

Respondent: People were afraid to join in those days, they would say what happens if I am arrested what will my husband say, I must first ask for his permission. I worked with a friend of mine Ngenge, when Winnie addressed a rally at Orlando Stadium, I can't remember which year. Everybody was looking at us because we were wearing our t-shirts which indicated that we were activists, in those days police would arrest you for wearing a t-shirt. When we returned from the meeting to Benoni, we found that most people were arrested, a policeman had been burnt. The police were arresting everyone especially the younger generation. We were fortunate that we never saw one policeman on that day, we would have been arrested for wearing the t-shirt.

Food and Canning held an NEC Meeting in Durban, it was myself, Grace, Kleinboo, two office bearers, comrade Nkadimeng and comrade Peter. The police arrested us in Durban, they wanted to know what we were doing in Durban. Klein explained that he was from the Vaal, they opened his diary and asked him what meeting he

was attending, the confiscated the diary. The other people we were with told the police that we had given them a lift. Grace and myself were locked up at the back of the van. They took us to some police station on the highest floor. Their dogs searched us and they kept us for the whole night and went to join the meeting.

Facilitator: so they never charged you?

Respondent: No they just took our diaries and were never given back to us

Facilitator: any form of torture?

Respondent: none the only thing they did is they wanted to force us to admit to the things we didn't know. We just told them that we are attending a meeting at a certain hotel, and we had our hotel reservations with us as proof. They kept our diaries and told us to collect them after the meeting.

Facilitator: so is that your only experience with the police?

Respondent: yes, it was the only one. At COSATU house they tortured us, they put us against the wall and kicked us around, they wanted money from us

Facilitator: when was that?

Respondent: In 1998 at COSATU House when the police raided COSATU house

Facilitator: that's after 1994 you wouldn't expect something like that to happen

Respondent: I think it was 1989, there was a huge SARWU strike, COSATU offices were in Jeppe Street at the time.

Facilitator: so what happened, did the police just raid COSATU unexpectedly

Respondent: Yes they just stormed in during the strike. I think SARWU workers knifed some policemen, they were marching to the station in Doornfontein. They were travelling from the office to the station chanting and singing. They were confronted by policemen and fought with them, one of them must have knifed the police, that is why the police came to raid COSATU House.

Facilitator: Did they let you go after the raid or were you arrested?

Respondent: Others were arrested, they could not arrest everybody because the police vans were full they couldn't fit everyone. The raid started from the 7th floor and we were on the 5th floor.

Facilitator: Was your family not worried about your involvement in this thing considering that you were arrested and things like that?

Respondent: My family was worried but they understood.

Facilitator: so at South African Fruit were you mostly women and some men or was it the other way round?

Respondent: SA Dried Fruit most of the employees were women, women would prepare the fruit and men were appointed as drivers and their assistants, other women were cleaners, other men would load the dried fruit on to containers so that they can be transported by train.

Facilitator: Did the company take advantage of the fact that most employees are women therefore they can exploit them and not give them benefits such as maternity benefits and so on?

Respondent: Yes it's true that is why women joined unions, they were treated like school children, we were not allowed to talk to each other when we were working, or chew gum as if we are school children. That is how they treated us. When he appeared people were so intimidated it was as if he had some voodoo on him, people were terrified of him, even if you were not doing anything once he appears you are so terrified.

Facilitator: Did you manage to deal with him?

Respondent: Yes the union assisted us in dealing with him. We became united and were able to deal with him. If a worker was fired we wanted to know why and he was confronted, because of the unity we were able to deal with him

Facilitator: How did the employer deal with maternity leave?

Respondent: We had maternity benefits but without pay, people would apply from labour, also in those days maternity leave was two months only. It was unpaid and the union was busy negotiating that it be paid.

Facilitator: What other problems did women have in this industry?

Respondent: The floors were cold and so was the environment, a lot of water was used so women wanted protective clothing such as protective boots and gloves to protect them, also we all had to wear caps because we were working with food. Proper uniform and protective clothes were introduced and proper brooms for cleaning the wet floors were also introduced.

Facilitator: So considering the previous working conditions were employees not affected, for example others suffering from arthritis etc.?

Respondent: Some employees worked a lot with spirit and they were affected, others were weighing spices, their lungs were affected, they had TB, others died. The ones working with spirit were given milk and masks.

Facilitator: Generally was safety at work guaranteed or did you always have these problems?

Respondent: We had these problems, shop stewards had to solve them but the problems were eventually addressed.

Facilitator: what about overtime, were they paying overtime?

Respondent: The employer would promise to pay overtime but the money was not visible. We were instructed to work overtime without proper planning irrespective of our plans. So the union assisted us in this regard, management was requested to give enough notice for staff working overtime and also they were asked to ensure that there's food for staff. But because management did not want to spend for staff they would ensure that before it is time for food they release us.

Facilitator: During your stay at SA Dried Fruit did you guys have a strike or major strike?

Respondent: The workers were afraid to strike, for instance let's say they are not satisfied with the wages, they would rather continue working and wait for the union to negotiate on their behalf. Also the other thing was if other branches had agreed to an increase like the branches in Cape Town etc., we were also forced to accept whatever the increase was.

Facilitator: Considering that you were a female shop steward in the early 1980s was that not a problem with the male employees?

Respondent: Not really because at the time men were generally cautious, we had a male and female shop stewards in our factory. They didn't have a problem with me because I was on the other side in Despatch, so if they had a problem they would speak to the other one. But we would meet on a monthly basis.

Facilitator: When you look back was it worth it to work at SA Dried Fruit or do you regret it?

Respondent: I have no regrets because I learnt a lot from SA Dried Fruit. I felt proud for assisting my colleagues to fight for their rights. It is something to be proud of, something you can tell your children when you are older.

Facilitator: And then you moved to FAWU as an organiser, that was after 1983, how did it happen, did you apply for the job or were you recruited from SA Dried Fruit?

Respondent: what happened is we had organisers in our office and they mismanaged the funds and they were all fired. So the workers elected me because they trusted me, that is how I was recruited to work in the office.

Facilitator: were you willing to go and work at the office?

Respondent: I loved it because it gave me an opportunity to interact with other workers, to encourage them to affiliate to a union?

Facilitator: as an organiser what were you charged with, what were your responsibilities?

Respondent: As an organiser, my work entailed factory visits, calling general meetings, ensuring the shop stewards were representing the workers etc. At the end of each month I had to report on my monthly activities. Nowadays the organisers do not do factory visits, they would say they spend a lot of time at the CCMA or that they are recruiting. They don't even attend the monthly meetings.

Facilitator: The kind of problems that you encountered when you did the factory visits because you went to different factories, what kinds of problems did you encounter?

Respondent: The popular one was theft, shop stewards complained about theft, this disorganised the shop stewards and also the workers suspected that the shop stewards are the ones informing management about theft. It was also an opportunity for us to teach the shop stewards the importance of not stealing because they are the ones who are supposed to look after the workers. Also the workers would complain about the ethnicity of the shop stewards, they are all Northern Sotho or Xhosa speaking, they must be recruiting each other. In other companies like Ilanga Bay, as a female organiser most of the workers were supporters of Inkatha. So the men were not happy to be represented by a woman. They could do nothing about that. During the unrest and riots I did not feel free I was even afraid to go to the toilet when it is late at night. I remember an incident whereby there was a shop steward from Ilanga Bay was shot by unknown people, we suspected Inkatha, so I was always afraid.

Facilitator: the formation of UWUSA in 1986 did it make things worse?

Respondent: Yes it did because the workers believed that it was a better union because it is for the people, they do not speak the white languages they speak black languages for people to understand.

Facilitator: how was the UWUSA issue handled?

Respondent: We asked the workers to ensure that UWUSA within the companies that we organised should not exceed our membership so that management does not sign with them.

Facilitator: were things changing over time in the lives of the workers because you interacted with the workers on a daily basis and so on?

Respondent: Things were gradually changing because there was no CCMA, if there was a dispute the matter would be taken to conciliation, mediation, arbitration and the like. We got assistance from the white people who were in politics like Charles Nuping, we would sometimes arrive late to such meetings because we had no transport, sometimes the train would be delayed and he would be so angry and say I am going to call your General Secretary and inform him that you came late to represent the workers. They helped us a lot. In some cases the workers would give us a mandate on the increase, and in some instances we were not sure we will get it but once we get it the workers would be so excited.

Facilitator: What about the Industrial Council, were they effective?

Respondent: Yes they were effective because on our side we had companies like Sanresi??, and others who went, of course other companies were not interested.

Facilitator: What were the challenges of being an organiser?

Respondent: A lot of challenges. If there were problems within a company I was the first point of entry to deal, the workers would want to know where I stood – so whenever there were problems the union would want to get the information from the organiser. The union will first read the report and ask for clarity where necessary and then I would then ask for advice on how to proceed with the matter. Nowadays the organisers do not submit any reports, they have to be pushed before they can submit reports. Every month we submitted a report on our daily activities.

The reports were interrogated. I learnt a lot through the reports because when the reports were interrogated they would make comments and advise you on the process you could have taken, if a similar incident happens then one would know how to deal with the issue. When I was doing company visits I first met with the shop stewards before meeting with management to discuss the mandate, I will then take the shop stewards with me when meeting with management.

Facilitator: Were the employers welcoming in these different industries when you visited them as organisers?

Respondent: If you have made an appointment to meet with them they were welcoming, they had no problems because the agreement was signed and they had accepted the union, although they would be worried about what you were bringing to the table they were welcoming. Remember I was mandated by the workers so I had to share the workers concerns with management.

Facilitator: the bad side of being an organiser, the stresses?

Respondent: It was stressful, some workers would always have something negative to say, some would say we are not doing anything, some would say we are, those kinds of things but what assisted me was the monthly report, it bailed me out.

Facilitator: Why did you leave Gauteng to the Free State, what happened in 1992?

Respondent: I left Gauteng for the Free State because after the merger, we had problems, we did not get along, the organisers from Sweet Food and from Food and Canning, sometimes there would be conflict. The general complaint was that organisers from Food and Canning wanted to service the companies we've been

servicing and not the new companies. This caused a lot of conflict. Some accused us that we behaved as if we owned the companies that we've been servicing we are not welcoming to the other companies. A post was advertised here in the Free State, I applied and moved to the Free State.

Facilitator: What was your impression of FAWU when you came here?

Respondent: When I first arrived here, I was the first woman to work in a branch office, so everybody welcomed me, I felt welcome.

Facilitator: You said you came here to work as an organiser?

Respondent: No I came to work here as an administrator.

Facilitator: were you tired of organising?

Respondent: Yes I wanted to work in the office, I didn't want the field problems anymore.

Facilitator: But the general challenges faced by this office what were they since 1992, post 1994 until today?

Respondent: There were no problems as long as I did my work. You know that not everybody will like you, some would find fault for whatever reason. When I first came here there were no computers, we were using a telefax machine, there was only one. The machine was located in the branch and the organiser who was based

there wanted to use the telefax alone, we were not given a chance to type until comrade Sondiyazi complained about this, he was the Chairperson at the time. He would insist that I typed, but with time things changed they bought computers for us. When we received the computers it was a challenge for me because I had never used a computer before, but because I was determined we asked head office to send someone to train us on the computer. This person came and trained us on Saturday and Sunday, we were two and assisted each other. That is how I learnt about computers.

Facilitator: In service training is it taken into consideration or are you on your own?

Respondent: Training, I would say things are better now because we have an education office at head office, the office takes care of all our training needs. They ensure that we get the necessary training.

Facilitator: Some people said that unions were dominated by whites and so on, did this affect FAWU in some way?

Respondent: After the merger yes, I would say it was from Sweet Food. Sweet Food's general secretary was Jay Naidoo, I think people did not like him, we had Jan Theron, I think people thought that he was the one who was causing divisions amongst black people but we didn't see it in that way. I think due to stress he decided to take a long leave, that is how he was dismissed, they found a loophole. He was pleasant to work with. During his days, I reported in Jeppe Street at Chester House, when I arrive in the morning at 8:30 he would be waiting at the office – he had flown from Cape Town, he was already waiting reading his newspaper. Before I make tea for him he would ask for the cheque book, cash book, receipt book etc. He will check everything and say make me a cup of tea. This taught me to be honest because one didn't know when the general secretary would arrive. He checked everything, if there was a shortage you would be dismissed with immediate

effect. We had a chairperson who worked at Ilanga Bay, he came to the Jo'burg office, we trusted him as the chairperson, we left him at our office. He got hold of the cheque book, forged the signatures and withdrew some money. We continued working without realising what had happened. Much later we were told so much money was withdrawn out of the account. We were told that the money was withdrawn from Boksburg. We were taken to the police station in Boksburg. We were questioned many times. Unfortunately for him they found out that it was the chairperson of Ilanga Bay, head office informed us that he had been arrested. We were shocked because we were now in conflict with each other. In those days the police did their work. I think he was convicted and served a 3 year jail term.

Facilitator: Post 1994 what was the direction of the unions supposed to be, some went to parliament, some remained in the unions – the unions were run by comrades?

Respondent: Yes we believed that unionists going to parliament will represent the workers but this was not the case. We also thought they will report back to us, they forgot about us. The others who were in Women's Forum like comrade Joyce from Jo'burg who has since passed on, she continued attending our meetings. Susan Shabangu also attended our meetings, she was an administrator, but others completely forgot about us, we hardly see them. Like comrade Gudungoane, I don't think he will recognise me now. He was the secretary of NUMSA (interruption) in the branch. He was continually arrested and released – so whenever we had to have a meeting we had to report the meeting at the police station. He would ask us as administrators to request the permission for him at the police station. Although we were afraid we would still go and request permission on his behalf. I don't think he would remember me today.

Facilitator: There's a debate on the issue of deployment of people to parliament and other government structures, was it ever discussed whether it is serving the workers or not, within FAWU or did it just continue since 1994?

Respondent: I think it is clear that these people are not coming back, they are not there to represent the workers but rather they went for themselves. Some of the organisers were elected as councillors, there was a decision to ask such people to resign as organisers. Later on this was overturned, they were encouraged to attend meetings. This was approved by head office. I think they are going to discuss it again, councillors must stick to being councillors and give other people a chance to be organisers.

Facilitator: Has the situation become better for workers after 1994?

Respondent: After 1994 things became better – workers are no longer like before. In the past if a meeting was called everybody would stop working to attend the meeting, nowadays some don't even bother to attend the meetings. I think things are better for them since 1994.

Facilitator: Generally are you guys happy with the labour laws?

Respondent: I can't say much for now, generally we are not happy with labour brokers. That is the big problem at the moment. For instance companies like SASCO had 100 workers who were affiliated to FAWU, they are now 50 and the other 50 is employed by labour brokers, or 60/40, the workers are not happy, that is why COSATU is against labour brokers.

Facilitator: but are you likely to succeed with the labour broker issue?

Respondent: I think we will succeed, if we don't succeed it means we will no longer have workers, which means we won't have jobs anymore, we are paid by the subscriptions, we are doing our best to assist the workers. The workers today are so different to the ones before, when meetings were called workers responded, they would spend their money to attend a meeting Jo'burg irrespective of the amount. Nowadays the workers are stingy they expect the unions to fund the trips, some even charge us more for taxi fares. Others understand and others don't. In those days one was able to distinguish between male and female, now they are all the same, some women would take the taxi fare money and buy liquor with it, in our days women did not drink, for them to enjoy there must be liquor.

Facilitator: do you think FAWU has grown since 1994 in terms of numbers?

Respondent: After 1994 FAWU grew because after 1994 we merged with SAPAWU, the one that included farm workers and other sectors, that is how the numbers grew, but also we lost some members to retrenchments, others are dismissed for stealing etc. CCMA has also assisted us by recruiting members for us, they would refer workers to us.

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

Respondent: not really, I think we discussed everything

Facilitator: any closing word? Do you regret having joins unions, if you had to leave again would you live another life?

Respondent: No I have no regrets for having joined the union, it has made a lot of difference in my life. I am happy I was involved in the unions.

Facilitator: thanks very much for your time

Respondent: thank you.

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