

Joe Kgopane

Abstract

Joe Kgopane was born, schooled and matriculated in Limpopo. His first job was with Sappi in Johannesburg in 1982. Although there was a trade union there he did not join. He was retrenched by Sappi and worked for Boart Hard Metals and joined the trade union there. It was only when he was employed at Tlamola College in 1991 that he became active in the union there, Nehawu, and was elected a shop steward.

The interview describes conditions when he first started at the college where there was no equality between blacks and whites and where if the white person didn't like a black person, that person could be fired; workers were not provided with the correct resources and equipment to do their jobs properly. The employer also didn't take the union seriously and didn't listen to the union.

The union took up these problems so that today conditions are much better. The last strike that he remembers was in 2007. The union today spends the bulk of its time dealing with grievances of workers. Shop stewards receive training from Nehawu soon after they are elected. Although initially there were few women shop stewards because their husbands did not like them to attend meetings at night, he says that now women are active in shop steward structures.

Facilitator: This is an interview with Ntate Joe Kgopane, we are in Kwa-Thema, the date is 30 March 2012, interview is done by Brown Maaba. Thanks very much for your time. Please give me a background as to where you were born, your family background, your schooling and how you ended up in union structures?

Respondent: I was born in Limpopo Province at Tshikanoshi Village. I started my schooling at Matlala Primary School at the same village. My high school was at Refilwe High School and then later to Makhosana High School to do my Matric. After finishing my Matric, I came to Gauteng and started to work for companies. I first worked for Sappi Companies and I also worked for Boart Hard Metals. I left Boart Hard Metals when I came here. I applied in 1991 in August and then to this college. The name of the college at the time was called Tlamoha Technical College. I started working here at the college on 1 August until now.

Facilitator: What is it called now?

Respondent: It is now called Ekurhuleni East College.

Facilitator: Why did you leave Limpopo to come and work here, was it because there were no job opportunities in Limpopo?

Respondent: Yes sir because most people after finishing their schooling they would come to Gauteng.

Facilitator: So did you complete your schooling (Matric)?

Respondent: Yes I did

Facilitator: You did not consider studying further

Respondent: My background was very much poor

Facilitator: So you had to come and work for yourself or the family?

Respondent: For my family

Facilitator: So your first job was with Sappi which year?

Respondent: Unfortunately I forget the year, but it was 1982

Facilitator: Did they have a union at that time?

Respondent: Yes at the time I didn't join the union although there was a union

Facilitator: Was the union strong or were you not interested?

Respondent: It was too strong

Facilitator: what was the name of the union?

Respondent: I don't know but it was a paper union, FATUSA or something I just forget the name because I had no interest in unions at the time

Facilitator: Why did you leave Sappi to Boart Metals?

Respondent: There was no work at the time, some people were retrenched and I was one of those, so it was last one in first out. From there I went to do a skills development in Elandsfontein, the training programme was sponsored by Murray and Roberts. They offered training for admin clerks and storemen. After the course I looked for work and got the job at Boart Metals. (interruption).

Facilitator: You were saying you went for training and after that you joined Boart Metals ..

Respondent: And then I worked there until I came here in 1991 on 1 August.

Facilitator: Did they have a union at Boart Metals?

Respondent: Yes there was

Facilitator: so you still didn't join

Respondent: I didn't join

Facilitator: what type of work did you do at Boart Metals?

Respondent: I worked in the stores department

Facilitator: How were worker problems handled at Boart Metals?

Respondent: The union handled matters in a good manner on behalf of the workers

Facilitator: So what happened to those workers who did not join the union, who represented them? Were you not afraid what might happen if you are fired and was not a union member?

Respondent: No I was still looking and thereafter I joined after some time. I wanted to have an understanding about unions

Facilitator: How long did you work for Boart Metals?

Respondent: 3.5 years because I started working here in August 1990

Facilitator: When you arrived here did you form a union or did it exist already?

Respondent: A union existed

Facilitator: What were the challenges facing workers in 1991?

Respondent: When I arrived they had a union called .., I forget the name but we changed to NEHAWU. The common problem at the time, during the apartheid era, the employer did not listen consider employees and the problems they were faced with. They just didn't listen to the workers. We continued to talk to them until they understood. Sometimes they were not buying cleaning materials but wanted to complain about the workplace being dirty. As time went on the workers got to know about unions and this is how they learnt how to communicate with the employer.

Facilitator: So when did you join NEHAWU?

Respondent: In 1991

Facilitator: why did you join NEHAWU and left the other union?

Respondent: The other union (interruption) we believed that the union was controlled by the employer. All government employees at the time took a resolution to leave the union and join NEHAWU.

Facilitator: So people were not afraid to join NEHAWU?

Respondent: the workers were not afraid to join NEHAWU, they were interested in joining NEHAWU because NEHAWU representatives explained the benefits of joining NEHAWU to the workers.

Facilitator: How did management respond, were they not angry that you joined NEHAWU?

Respondent: No they accepted without grudges, the employer was threatened by NEHAWU

Facilitator: Who was the first shop steward of NEHAWU?

Respondent: I was the first shop steward, we first recruited Tlamagalea, it was myself and Sydney Mhlanga

Facilitator: What kind of problems did you address at the time?

Respondent: The main problem at the time was whites generally treated black workers badly, we wanted equality in the workplace. Workers would be fired just because a white person has a personal problem. We requested the employer to communicate with workers and try to solve the problem instead of just firing them. Things changed gradually but finally came right after 1994

Facilitator: but before then they would just fire anyone?

Respondent: They wanted to do that but we would fight them as a union not to fire anyone. What they would say is "a lot of people are standing outside the gate looking for work, we will fire you and employ one of them". This is what we fought for.

Facilitator: How were the working conditions?

Respondent: Not so good at the time but we forced the employer to make the conditions conducive for us. The security staff of the college was employed by the government. Those that did night duty did not have the necessary resources like for instance a torch. We forced the employer to provide the necessary resources for staff. Gradually the working conditions improved. The employer also started buying uniform for staff, whereas in the past people wore their own clothes. Most of the changes were effected after 1994. They also started buying cleaning materials and protective clothing where necessary.

Facilitator: so things changed?

Respondent: Yes after 1994 everything went well.

Facilitator: What about the salaries?

Respondent: The salaries were controlled by the national department of Education. We were paid the same rates as people working for the Department of Education.

Facilitator: Did you organise strikes?

Respondent: No, if there was a salary strike it was across the board for all government employees not individual schools/colleges

Facilitator: After joining NEHAWU did you ever strike?

Respondent: No strikes, we would join in strikes to support our other colleagues because in most cases the problems were similar.

Facilitator: Like what for instance?

Respondent: Salaries, all schools were on strike

Facilitator: which year?

Respondent: I forgot, I think they were two, the last strike was in 2007, the other one I cannot remember, it's quite some time back sorry

Facilitator: But did the strike succeed, did the department give in to your demands?

Respondent: Yes they did but not the amount we were demanding

Facilitator: What about benefits?

Respondent: The benefits were good, other people wanted to buy houses and they did buy houses through the housing subsidy.

Facilitator: What about benefits for women like maternity leave?

Respondent: We didn't have problems with maternity benefits, the Department of Education approved maternity benefits for all its employees across the country.

Facilitator: The union here at Tlamoha, was it dominated by men only or did you have female members as well?

Respondent: Both men and women joined the union

Facilitator: they were not afraid to join?

Respondent: No they were not but what they were afraid of was to become shop stewards

Facilitator: Why?

Respondent: We once asked them they told us that meetings are held at night and our husbands may not like it. That was the reason given, so we couldn't force them.

Facilitator: So are things still the same?

Respondent: no nowadays if a woman is elected they attend meetings even if it's at night

Facilitator: Are men comfortable being led by women?

Respondent: No they have no problem

Facilitator: so you've been a shop steward from 1991 to date?

Respondent: Yes from 1991 to date, when elections are held the workers keep re-electing me. The other people are interested but they do not have the necessary confidence, they have a fear of meeting with management. If you want to be a shop steward you must not have an interest in joining management because if you do you will be easily tempted. I've been re-elected over and over again

Facilitator: why are they terrified of management, are they perhaps afraid they might be fired or what?

Respondent: No that is why I am talking about positions. Let's say a position is advertised, you can apply, so generally people are worried that if they do become shop stewards they will not get an opportunity to be part of management. We try to encourage them but they are just not interested

Facilitator: How is the management nowadays, do they listen to the workers or are they still stubborn?

Respondent: Our management is stubborn. Right now when interviews are held they don't invite union officials to be part of the interview panel, they are stubborn on that. This is a problem for us as union officials. We had a meeting with members from other colleges and township schools. A decision has been made that members will be separated according to

the different sectors, for instance grouped according to colleges, Brakpan, Springs, Benoni, Daveyton and Kwa-Thema. A launch will be held soon – colleges will be on their own. We will have to solve the college problems. At the moment the schools are on a break, after the 10th we are going to launch and elect new officials for both lecturers and the workers. This is where we are going to ask them why they do not invite union officials to sit on interview panels

Facilitator: Have you discussed this with them?

Respondent: We have spoken to them, but because we were all one group, when we are alone we will be able to focus to the problems facing colleges in general

Facilitator: What other grievances do you have apart from the interview issue?

Respondent: Interviews are a major problem for us. It is not right for the union not to be present when unions are held. That is our main issue at the moment, other problems are minor.

Facilitator: You also said you want to split from the big group..?

Respondent: Yes we've already split from the big group which included secondary and high schools. When the schools reopen, after the 10th we are going to launch

Facilitator: so it will only be a union for colleges only

Respondent: Yes

Facilitator: Are college problems similar?

Respondent: the problems are not the same

Facilitator: Can you explain to me please?

Respondent: Challenges facing schools and colleges are not the same because for instance members from secondary schools and high schools work less hours. When schools are closed they also close, colleges do not close when the schools are closed. We are operating differently. In the past, before colleges became FET's, the workers used with the students, maybe return a day or two before the schools reopen, now there are no more holidays things have changed.

Facilitator: From 1991 to date, what kind of problems did you encounter in the last 15 to 20 years? Worker problems?

Respondent: Workers generally have problems, you need to be very careful when you deal with workers. The problems expect you to represent them and speak on their behalf, get a mandate from them. The other problem with workers is as shop stewards we will call a general meeting where workers can give us a mandate. Instead some will not come because at that point in time they have no grievances but as soon as they have a grievance they expect the grievance to be sorted out immediately. You can't say to the worker when we call a general meeting you do not come to the meetings, you have to listen to them

and get their mandate and take it to management. Those are the challenges we are faced with generally.

Facilitator: Have you raised these issues with them?

Respondent: Others understand but some don't, there's nothing we can do about this problem and we can't ignore them either when they have problems. They expect us to represent them irrespective of the conditions.

Facilitator: In terms of disciplinary cases over the years, theft etc., how did you deal with them?

Respondent: The disciplinary procedure .., in most cases we try to caution them against stealing because it will lead to a disciplinary case, if there is no evidence this cannot be proven, but if there is enough evidence I cannot represent you, you were caught red handed and I cannot argue with management. As a shop steward what I can do is plead on your behalf so that you are not fired. So some of the workers when you are pleading with management on their behalf they assume you are a sell out. All I can do is apologise to management on your behalf and ask for leniency. We try to reason with the workers.

Facilitator: What happened in the past, does the employer fire you in disciplinary cases?

Respondent: No nobody has been fired so far but there has been a lot of misconduct. Gradually there aren't so many cases, before 1994 we had many cases.

Facilitator: What about absenteeism and drunkenness at work?

Respondent: No we don't have a problem of absenteeism

Facilitator: what about drunkenness?

Respondent: No, it happened in the past when we were using government security personnel – we heard that they used to get drunk especially the night shift staff. Nowadays we do not have such problems.

Facilitator: Does NEHAWU empower shop stewards with training?

Respondent: yes

Facilitator: What kind of training?

Respondent: To handle the cases of the workers with management; how to work with the workers in terms of communication and their work.

Facilitator: Is the training beneficial?

Respondent: Yes very much so

Facilitator: so how often do you go for training?

Respondent: When new shop stewards are elected into office, every three years we hold elections. Three months later a workshop on shop steward training is held in order to empower them. How to deal with management and workers etc.

Facilitator: So far have you represented workers at the CCMA?

Respondent: No what happens is if we have a serious case we call the officials from the region to come and assist us.

Facilitator: so have you spoken to them about lack of representation in the interview panels or are you going to sort this out yourselves?

Respondent: After the elections of the colleges are held, we are going to write a letter to our central office and tell them our grievance and await their response. We would like the union to be part of the interview panel.

Facilitator: Do you work overtime?

Respondent: No the Department of Education does not allow overtime

Facilitator: You've been involved in trade union activities for quite some time, is this not time consuming for you?

Respondent: No it isn't time consuming for me because I don't mind.

Facilitator: What about labour brokers, do they affect you?

Respondent: Labour broking is a problem, as long as it affects all COSATU unions I am also affected although it is not directed at me. An injury to one is an injury to all. In our college it doesn't happen but I cannot say I am not affected because it affects all union members. So it is a problem to all unions.

Facilitator: Is there another union in your college besides NEHAWU?

Respondent: There are other unions like SADTU and NAPTOSA

Facilitator: So there's no competition?

Respondent: Competition will always be there. Other unions like NAPTOSA, there isn't much competition because they are scared to meet with management – they wait for announcements from the media and await management to implement (phone rang)

Facilitator: You were telling me about NAPTOSA?

Respondent: Ja, the workers await the information through the media after general negotiations, they are not part of us therefore we don't care about what they do. We are encouraging them to join us, some lecturers have joined NEHAWU

Facilitator: Is there collaboration between NEHAWU, NAPTOSA and SADTU?

Respondent: We meet if there are common problems and collaborate, if possible we assist each other. In most cases we are the ones that would make the first move and take the matter up with management.

Facilitator: Does management take unions seriously or not?

Respondent: No management does not take the union seriously that is why there's a split, so that colleges can discuss their grievances directly with management. After the launch we are going for elections and we are going to invite them. After that we will write them a letter informing them the union officials and sign a new recognition agreement with them. We want the union to be represented.

Facilitator: so you haven't signed the recognition agreement?

Respondent: We are now starting on a new slate as a union for colleges only after the split

Facilitator: There is a belief that people are no longer interested in unions. What is your opinion? Has this affected you in any way?

Respondent: yes people like to say that but when problems arise they go straight to the union. They realise that if they have problems it's only the union that can assist them. They also know that without a union management will have the power to fire me. They join unions for the support but if the union needs their support they don't support unions, things are like generally. (interruption).

Facilitator: In your opinion what is the future of NEHAWU, do you think it will be bright?

Respondent: I think NEHAWU has a bright future with the young generation. The young generation are in support of NEHAWU. They support it.

Facilitator: Okay, what about labour laws, are you happy with the labour laws?

Respondent: Yes we are happy with the labour laws although others are in the process of being amended.

Facilitator: Thank you very much for your time

Respondent: Thank you.

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