

Robert Mashego

Facilitator: This is an interview with comrade Robert Mashego we're in Germiston, the date is 24 October 2012 interview is done by Brown Maaba. Comrade thanks very much for your time. Just kindly give me a sense of who Robert Mashego is, where do you come from and how did you end up in the world of unions?

Respondent: I was born in a small town called Graskop in Mpumalanga but immediately moved and settled at Acornhoek but grew up in a place in Bushbuckridge called Xantha. I started my schooling there in the 1960s, I was born on 12 March 1959, I started my schooling in 1965 in Bushbuckridge, I did my primary school there, moved to secondary school in Boisonto at a school called Soshangane Secondary school. I went to Makwakazi High to do my Matric and then came to Gauteng where I started working for the Railways then in 1980. I worked for the Railways and finally we re-introduced SARWU in 1983.

You will have realised that before SARWU in the Railways there was staff associations, black people belonged to something called Black Trade Union, BLATU, which we ..., because it was not necessarily revolutionary and so on. We left it and re-formulated SARWU in 1983 but officially launched it in 1985 just before COSATU was re-launched in Durban. You will know that since then were not recognised by Railways up until the 1987 strike. By that time I was the convenor of the East Rand which was inclusive of Cleveland up to Ogies and this side up to Wokrust. I was to convene those and I'm sure the history of what happened in 1987 is known to everybody. The biggest strike where quite a lot of people were injured, killed and disappeared, others arrested. And I served in all the structures there, your committee of 10, your Central Shop Steward Council, later on the Branch Chairperson of Springs, and I became the Regional Chairperson of SARWU in Wits which was normally called Southern Transvaal. We merged with BLATU, I became also the Chairperson of SATAWU in the province and when we merge with TNG, I also became the Chairperson of SATAWU in Gauteng and finally I became the Second Deputy President of SATAWU since

2003 until 2011 October. Now I am full time in the office of the Chief, I am the Chief Whip of Ekurhuleni, I am no longer in those structures.

Facilitator: Just to go back, after completing Matric was it your intention to look for a job? Didn't you want to go to university or any other plans?

Respondent: I needed to ..., when I was doing what we normally call form 4 then I started to have an interest on radio and I was allowed three times a year to go and practice DJ work at Radio Tsonga then. I worked with Roy Ngobeni and Joel Salani, I had an intention to work for the radio but I did not have money to take the profession forward. In actual fact I grew up in a family where I was the only one going to school and there was a second born, nobody was working. I could not go to university. So I had no option. I actual fact in the absence of radio work sometimes I would go and work in the farms in a place called Mdlazi, at a tomato farms, sometimes in the spinach farms. I could not have money to go .., even when I did my Matric I would go to school barefoot sometimes, most of the time I would go to school barefoot. My secondary school, from Soshangane to Bisonto was something like 15 kilometres to and fro, 30 kilos .., for three full years I walking that route. Fortunately when I went to Magwagwazane it was closer to home, there I would walk about 2 kilos. There was no money to go to university. The possibility of going to university was not there, or even to a training college for that matter. For you to be working for the radio station you needed to have JST, or PTC certificate, Junior Teachers Course or Senior Teachers Course would give you the right to work at a radio station. I could not go to those institutions.

Facilitator: So it was by chance that you finished Matric as well?

Respondent: You remember by that time we were paying something like R32 a year and the books we were getting at school, everything we were getting there, so yours was to .. if you could get the money to pay the school once in January there

was nothing that you still had to pay. It was perseverance of going to school without having anything to eat, no uniform, no clothes but at least my mother was selling tomatoes and cabbages at Acornhoek station, paying off the school fees was not necessarily difficult because you would pay once in January and again the following year in January. So it was a little bit affordable from my mother's point of view.

Facilitator: You joined Railways in 1980, employed as an ordinary labourer or because you had Matric you were given a better job?

Respondent: There was no black person who would get a better job at the Railways by that time, I was in Afrikaans, Algemene Werker, general worker. I know I was working here at Germiston, there's a school here called Parkhill Gardens. I was a messenger and rode a bicycle, from Parkhill college to Germiston station, moving post. Parkhill was a college of white people who wanted to be train drivers, and any other thing that whites wanted to be trained for, they trained at Parkhill college. So they were using .., their post box was in Germiston. So I had to go and fetch their letters from the post boxes in Germiston. That was my job, but in the meantime after going to Germiston with a bicycle backwards, I also had to clean the school, cut grass, actually see to it that the grass is green, cut the trees, trim them, all the agricultural duties of the school were done by me, we were a group of 4, the others were older I was youngest and the only one who could read and write. So I would be given the task of going to the post office. I was just a general worker.

Facilitator: How did you connect to the world of unions, were you just working and so on?

Respondent: Let me tell you how did I even start working for the Railways. At school I was a champion of 100 metres, I was a football star. So somewhere before I worked for the Railways I worked for a mine called PMC in Phalaborwa, I worked for

about two months as a temporary worker. We were then told that Railways is looking for football players in an area called Thulamahashe in Bushbuckridge. So all football players were supposed to go there and play a tournament of 8 teams and they will pick 22 people out of the 8 teams. I was one of those picked to go and compete in the tournament with the view that the officials of the Railways will pick 22 of us out of all of us. We played the tournament, it was during the Easter Holidays. On Saturday they picked 44 of us and we were supposed to play the following day. I was one of the 44. At the end of the day on Sunday 22 players were picked I was one of them. On Easter Monday we were taken by a Railway truck from Thulamahashe to Delmore Hostel here and were registered both as workers and football players. I must say that my first 9/10 months I did not do anything, I was playing football everyday, and athletics. I know that at some point sub 10, the 100 metres I did it in 1980 that's how fast I was, Peter Ngobeni, Wessel Chakile etc. But my biggest interest was in soccer. Afterwards I quit but I was a good soccer player.

So I started .., look at school, remember in 1976 we were involved in these uprisings, so political consciousness was always in my mind, very clear, and when I came here I was always reminded that you 1976 kids and so forth. I will not allow the situation where .., of course white people were baases all the time, so it was not an issue but I would say baas with a conscious knowing that this person is a fellow employee like myself. So the issue of fighting for the rights of workers had always been with me, it came with me from school. So immediately when I found out there was a union called BLATU I jumped for it because I wanted to .., I couldn't associate myself with somebody who will always be down trodden by whites from a school point of view, but BLATU was not the right union, they didn't do what I expected because I needed something that would fight for my rights, hence we decided to go for SARWU.

Facilitator: What was wrong with BLATU exactly?

Respondent: If you remember well, there was a department called Ndabazantu in those years, BLATU instead of being a trade union it acted in general the same way as Ndabazabantu. I remember one day I was charged for being late at work but this lateness I'm talking about was because of the trains because we were using a train from Delmore to Parkhill gardens. So there were no trains. There was one train that moved in the morning, moving from Germiston going past Parkhill, there was only one train with four coaches. It would go up and down all the time (interruption) where was I?

Facilitator: You were still talking about the fact that BLATU acted like Ndabazantu

Respondent: Ja it will always, we will sit in a disciplinary hearing, I'm charged, the duties that the union will do is just to interpret for me that's all, as if I don't understand Afrikaans. All they did was carry information between me and management. In actual fact you would go to them with a problem they would tell you more especially if you have a problem on Monday they will tell you have a hangover. The union would tell you that. It did not play the role of the union. To me it was a staff association aimed at bringing about black people to feel inferior to whites and I immediately thought that this is not a union because indeed it was not at that point in time. It was actually monopolising the black people against whites.

Facilitator: The nature of the working force then, was it militant, was it submissive?

Respondent: Both, you had old people who had been there for many years, they were not submissive, they were to some extent submissive but they were very clear that they are fighting for oppression by whites, old as they were. For instance they will teach us that we must not always submit to everything that white people tell you because at the time it was a question of black and white. They would say don't submit to anything but they will tell you to always submit to us because we are older people. They were clear what their human rights were, but they wanted to benefit

themselves from suppressing us .., to do work for them for instance they will tell you .. – I have an experience here at Parkhill gardens. There was a gentleman I came with from Bushbuckridge, Isaac Mkantsi, who was purely suppressing me on the basis of me being younger than him and we had to fight physically. They dismissed me for about two weeks. But because I was a good football player and a good athlete they told me don't go to Bushbuckridge we will find you a space somewhere around here. I fought with him and a white man Mr van der Walt .., I was dismissed for two months and after two months they re-employed me at Delmore Hostel now as a cook, I would peel potatoes, tomatoes .., worked in the kitchen because they needed me as a football player and athlete.

Facilitator: The establishment of SARWU then because you were not happy with BLATU, yourself and maybe the other workers as well, how did it happen?

Respondent: We actually met at Wits. Wits was then the only place where you could meet and talk union matters without being arrested. Wits had a lot of walls, I'm sure they are still there today named after the political stalwarts. So we would always meet at Wits, either at the Pavilion. When you are at Wits, people understand you are at a university but we knew were not necessarily at university we were trying to form a union. We received some document to read that informed us about a union of South African Railways and Harbours Workers Union which was instituted in 1936, which was banned together with the political parties, ANC, SACP and SACTU. And we went to read those books, got to understand about unions. People like Ray Alexandra were founder members then. We then realised this is the type of union we want, obviously informed by the fact that all of us liked the ANC. So the fact that it was aligned to the ANC and SACTU who was aligned to the ANC we believed it will never go wrong so we re-established the union. And fortunately, of course there was a debate there, that SARWU was related to a union in Britain, the National Union of Railway Workers, others were saying to us let us not name it SARWU because SARWU is banned, we named it NUR, but you see NUR is a British Union. The philosophies and the modus operandi of it was not material in South Africa. So there are thing .., the first four/five months we called ourselves NUR, but

when we read the documents what NUR represented, we found that it did not suit what we want. We wanted to be confrontational, we want to really fight, NUR is petitioning like the old ANC before 1944 when petitions were used etc. NUR was doing the same thing. So we believed petitioning is not going to help us, we want to be confrontational and we are not recognised, how can we petition when you are not recognised, you better fight for recognition and for us to fight is when you take a principle fighting, SARWU represented ... We met many times, it would take up to three days, Friday, Saturday and Sunday sleeping out at Wits hall discussing these matters. Sometimes we would sleep at Moulin Rouge for free, they would allow us to bring our own blankets to sleep overnight. It was not only SARWU that was being re-established, this included NUM, NEHAWU, different unions. By that time we were called public sector unions, POPCRU, SARWU, POTWA, NEHAWU and SACTU. Our thinking was the same, our opponent being government. Any finally we took a decision to launch, we launched in 1987 in April.

Facilitator: You said that it may have taken you some time as SARWU to get the Recognition Agreement until 1983, what happened, why was the employer refusing?

Respondent: You will realise that the Railways was an architect of apartheid, if you touch the Railways then you were touching the government of the day, it was actually the Department of Transport, your Ben Schoeman and Hendrik Schoeman Minister of Transport and so forth. So you were wanting government to recognise what they called a terrorist organisation in their book. Anything ANC, SACP was terrorism. So they would not even talk to us, in actual fact you would be arrested for wearing a t-shirt with an emblem of SARWU, they will tell you that you are ANC on the basis of just having .., even wearing a red t-shirt, because SARWU uniform was red and black. Or they would use tactics like, for instance if you are working for the Railways where trains are moving, anything red that a train driver sees the train driver must stop the train. It was legal that you don't go past anything red on a railway line, whether it's a human being or a piece of paper, it might be put there to warn you that there is danger in ahead of you. They had a way of wanting to ban the red

colour using the fact that on railway yard red is used for one thing and one thing only to stop the train and everything else that you are doing. And when you wore black they would say you would be killed because the drivers would not see you because you would be dark. There was a way of wanting to delay ... You will remember that for us to take a decision to want to .., even after 1995 having launched, we took a decision in 1986 that we want to fight in order to be recognised. We will not be recognised by singing everyday and so forth, but the Railways then head on. We decided to do that in February 1987. You will know the issue of bombing of Kgotso House, it was only because SARWU was on site, up until 1987 April when we .., there was a confrontation you will remember here at Germiston station, where 44 people died, most of us were injured. I had .., I am still walking around with a bullet at my back and at the same time I was arrested. That's why even today at SATAWU level, the 22nd of April is called SARWU day because a lot of things happened. Out of it we got the Recognition Agreement signed in May.

Facilitator: What really went wrong on the 22 April?

Respondent: Remember some of these things did not go to the commissioner

Facilitator: Okay let's just leave it there. Going back, the formation of SARWU in 1983 and the fact that you were dissatisfied with BLATU, the working conditions on the ground, on the Railways for black workers how would you describe them?

Respondent: It was slavery work. Black people were doing only slavery work. You would not have a black person who is given any other name except *aarbeeding* (labour). Yours was to assist a white man, if a white man is wanting to paint you must give him the painting material, you must mix the paint for him, if he's going to be building a wall you must give him the tools to do the work. A black man was an assistant all the time. And even if .., at some point you see when you do things too much at a time you become a technician yourself because sometimes when the

white people are tired they will tell you what to do and you do well, they would come and supervise and say that's fine. For instance installation of the railway line needs manpower, whites are not so many, so black people would pick up the rails and put them there, fasten up etc. So we generally started learning how things are done. Normally no black person was a worker, he was a helper all the time that is why when I started working for the Railways there were no deductions. You were given your money as is, no pension, medical aid or anything else. Nothing was deducted. We had no rights. For instance old people would work with us until June, when it is harvest time in October, they would go home and stay for four months to go and plough and when it is harvest time May/June they come back. So they can go home and send their sons to come and work for them for two months, after two months the son goes back home and the father comes back to his work. So there was nothing that regulated black people as workers. You were just an ordinary helper for Railways.

Up until things changed in 1983, where we were now allowed to .., I remember I went to a college as a bus driver in 1982 at George Koch. Later on I left bus driving and went for shunting. When I left I was then something, I had done a lot of things by then. But the first four/five years it was purely labourer job. And of course there were people who had been labourers for 40 years in the Railways, even today. I found them there, I worked there for 32 years. But there are those which I found there being labourers, they are still labourers today. So of course you must remember that Railways, if you go back to what the Railways was, it was like the municipalities and the mines. It was set up to help unemployable white people to have jobs, so even in black people it was like that, unemployable black people with no skills etc., you would be employed by Railways, as compared to now everybody must have Matric, must have university certificate to do certain things. It was not like that in our time, because you were not recognised as an employee, you were just a helper.

Facilitator: Any other challenges as an employees, issues of racism and so on, how were those overcome?

Respondent: Racism was not a language, you were living a racist life. If you say there's racism you are underscoring what racism was, or the prevalence of racism. It was a day to day norm to be seen an inferior person. For instance let me give you a typical example. When we were shunting at a depot called Welgedagt in Springs, we will shunt and when it is very cold, white people would be sitting .., they will send you to go and make tea for them far away from where you are working. Now as you walk with the tea to them, they sit there and drink tea, you must be wet making tea for them. And obviously sometimes they would bring tea themselves with a big teapot and will drink. I remember one day I was cold and I took .., Railways was giving us these mugs, the shiny steel mugs to drink with, but they were only given to whites. So the white man was out he could not see me, I immediately poured tea into a cup and drank. As I finished drinking he saw me, but because I was politically astute, he could not fight with me because they knew.., even today when you go to Welgedagt they would tell you "this one is hardegat" I will say baas to a person because I want to, if I don't want to I will call him by his name, they will swear at me, we will swear at each other because they understood me to be very clear. Now this old man, his name was Fankie Snitler. As I drank with his cup, he took the cup, he was so angry and smashed the cup with stones and steel and he put it on the railway line for the train to run over it. That come must not exist anymore, *'n kaffir het met my koppie gedrink*, that is what he said, *n kaffir het met koppie gebruik om tee te drink*, and he called all the white people to come and see that I drank with his cup. And I said yes I did. Why they asked, I said I needed tea I had no cup. As I'm saying I've seen quite a lot of my fellow black brothers being beaten up by white people, but I was never beaten up. With me they were very clear. For instance there will come a time on Saturday where people will knock off early because there is no work, but our time is 6 o'clock, others would ask "*baas asseblief daar is nie werk kan ek huis toe gaan*" especially on Saturdays, 1, 2 o'clock but our shift ends at 6. I will be working with a team they will allow everybody to go home except for me. If there shall be work coming I will do everybody's job because *ek is hardegat*. For me, I knew that here it is me and me alone.

So racism .., Fankie will call you sometimes and say "Robert" and I will say "ja, se gat" and he wants you to say ja baas Fankie. And if you don't say it you have not actually spoken or responded to him. If I say ja baas Fankie, he would say "*kom hierso my kaffir*", so he would be happy to have said so to you. But you see finally they came to realise that in actual fact it is a waste of time to call me a *kaffir* because when I'm happy that I called them *kaffir* too, when they get angry I would say what is *kaffir*, it's a human being, but doing this deliberately up to a point where they realised that this man .., that is why they allowed me to be a full time union leader, very early in 1993. They said we don't want you in our depot. The last time I worked physically my work at Railways was in 1993 up to 2011. They didn't allow me to the depot. Sometimes I would just go there, clock and the office will phone me and I will leave. But in order for them to avoid me, politicising their workplace they will allow me to go and work at the SARWU union office rather than to be at the depot. The union benefited. I grew politically and I benefited out of it.

Facilitator: And issues around safety for the workers, Railways is a tough industry, I'm sure there must have been injuries over a period of time?

Respondent: Let me tell you a very bad situation. Firstly let me say that Railways is safety conscious .., I must be honest about that. Even when we first started, *veiligheid* (safety) was the most important thing. The only thing is that .., working for the Railways was a punishment sometime so white people would sometimes come drunk at work .., they did no work anyway.

So when we blacks started becoming more relaxed we would sometimes drink at work, but if you are found Transnet would punish you because working drunk at Railways is a dangerous phenomenon. You can die at any given time. I have seen these things happen. Let me give you a typical example. On 27 May 1991 we were shunting, I was a shunter at the time, we had just received our salary, we had lunch, after lunch we went back to work. In the shunting yard there is something called "neck" - at the time we were shunting loose, we would run loose shunt to go with

different clients, and it was dangerous to work in the neck, very dangerous because we will get into trucks and loosen them up whilst the train is going up and down. So you must always be awake and on your toes. There was this guy I called Buti Joshua, we were both from Bushbuckridge, I found him there, he treated me like a younger brother, his surname is Nkuna I'm Mashego. We were not related but I respected him a lot. On this day I could see he is not right, he was drunk and the white man who was our opsinger (supervisor) Kud, they were drinking together most of the time. He could see Joshua is drunk. So he didn't worry I'm there, he comes to me, I was not drinking nor smoking. He comes to me and say chief I can't do this thing. Please take over for me and do the neck work. I agreed because I could see he was drunk. We went in and did the first thing, when busy with the second one, this man called Niehaus van Niekerk came to me and said "what do you want there?", I told him I'm doing it for Joshua. He said no Joshua is on duty, he is paid a salary it is his turn to be there, he must go there. I argued with him but he knew he will not win with me. He went to Joshua and said "do you want to work or not", Joshua was not too drink he had had something to drink, you could see he is not himself. So with anger he went and told me to stop, we spoke in Shangaan. I said to him But Joshua you can't, it is better for you to clock off and go home rather than to put your life in danger. This man said if you knock of I will book you absent and you will have to go and appear before management. It was after 2 in the afternoon towards 3 and we knocked off at 6 and generally from 4 we would stop. Joshua said don't worry I will deal with this issue. The train went up when it came back Joshua was not there. We called him on the walkie talkie he is not there we cannot see him. Now the driver of the train calls and tells us a man is lying underneath the train. I am with van Niekerk. I told him "go and see Joshua, you killed him, I told you the man is not right, there he is, he is dead, under the train". Instead of him going to see Joshua he ran away. He ran home. I walked, fortunately Joshua was not dead but his leg from the thigh up gone. So as I walk up I found his leg lying next to the railway line bleeding and Joshua lying there, helpless, he can't speak, the leg is broken the hand is broken. So the leg is gone but at least the hand is broken twice. The driver and I pull him out and called the ambulance, they took him to hospital. Today he is limbless, he does not have a leg but he can walk he is fine. And that's how dangerous it was.

I once saw a white man, you see when you break the trains there's a vacuum pipe which connects the trains. As you break the pipes, there is very strong air there, I saw a white man pulled unto the pipe, the whole hand while the train was moving, the train grinded him. But you are warned. I am answering your question, the company had systems in place to ensure that people know about the dangers, people were made aware of such things, we were all aware, Act 87 is all about safety. We are all expected to read Act 87, discussions on Act 87 are held on a daily basis. The reality is that we still do not follow the rules, we only have the discussions for compliance purposes, malicious sometimes. In my life I saw a lot of people dying especially in the shunting yard. Even when I was driving the bus, you are expected to do 37 checkpoints on the bus daily, and you must tick them before leaving with the bus. Nowadays they don't do it. The Act is there and you are supposed to do the checks, people just don't do it. Transnet has got those regulations in place they are not been followed.

Facilitator: When you look back what are the major achievements of SARWU, you guys came in in 1983, and over a period of time confronted issues, I'm sure benefits, salaries and so on?

Respondent: I will give you an example, using me as an example. When I started working for the Railways, you wouldn't believe how much I was paid. Remember I started working for the Railways, I was earning R87 a month as a general worker. So I went to the school of driving, my salary then went from R87 to R221 as a bus driver. I left bus driving and went to shunting, we were earning R333. I remember the first meeting I sat as a SARWU representative, I was not recognised at the time but they called everybody to come and negotiate in 1994, we were called there and were asked to make choices, what is it that we think we must get etc., - it was for the first time that we sat and discussed. Unfortunately we had too much work and there was a lot of overtime. We were made to choose, the April 1994 agreement is still very important today. I hope the union does not loose it because, me representing the shunting fraternity mistakenly chose overtime and train drivers chose money. So we were left at R333, train drivers were moved R221 to R664. But we didn't worry at

the time because we worked overtime as we pleased. So sometimes you would go home with R900, R700 from R333 because you were able to work overtime twice/three times your 8 hours you were supposed to work, sometimes you could work 18, or 21 hours they would not worry as long as you have worked. So we were very fooled by overtime. And for that reason, shunters were caught up in a situation where they were the lowest paid whereas before they were the highest paid, this happened because of the dangers we were working under. Now in 1987 when we went on strike, if you remember we said .., like the Marikanas are doing now, we demanded to be paid R1500 for a general worker from .., remember I said R87, at the time they were earning R137, we demanded R1500 and we went on strike. If you remember what the strike was about. The question is what benefit did we have, recognition was very important, we needed to be recognised. In order for us to be recognised if you remember, we had to get somebody to be dismissed and SARWU represented the worker by means of strike. Somebody who volunteered to do something wrong in order for him/her to be dismissed. And we did find one person in Gazini, he was an external truck driver. In Gazini we had internal and external truck drivers. What this means is internal truck drivers moved containers from offloading to a departure point and they leave the containers there, the external drivers take them out of Gazini. This guy Andre Nedzamba was his name, he worked as an external driver. We agreed with him on one Friday that today you must not check your money. As you go out and pick up the container from Checkers to somewhere else, the money that they pay they give to you, take another container, they pay you the money, they keep a copy, you also keep a copy. You go and pay at Gazini when you arrive. So he worked the whole day and we said to him he must not check all the money. It was not such a lot of money it was R60. He was staying in Katlehong, we said go home with the money but don't spend it because we want you to be dismissed so that when they want their money you must have it. And indeed he did not check, Friday, Saturday, Sunday, when he came back on Monday he was dismissed.

I was the convenor of the East Rand, as indicated East Rand started from Cleveland to Ogies, ..(unclear) Ermelo to Volkrust, Springs, Germiston and the others. Andrew is dismissed, so everything on that day, 22 of March, on we went on strike. On 24

March they reinstated Andrew. They said he must not even pay back the money we said no we are not going back to work, recognise SARWU. We told them we want to sign an agreement with them, we want to be a recognised union, if you don't recognise us we are not coming back to work. They said we have reinstated Andrew, we said it doesn't matter we want to be recognised as SARWU the union. Of course they dismissed all of us like in Marikana, we were all dismissed. On 18 April we were given letters of dismissal, all of us. Management would come where we were striking with police, Caspers and everything, they gave us letters of dismissal. We said fine, we remained. They brought in people from Namibia and Transnet was not feeling the pinch of the strike, so we agreed that we are going to target certain areas and everybody who is working we are going to take along. They must join us by force. That was on 22 April, the interlink place was Germiston station, that everybody who goes to Pretoria will go through Germiston. Germiston was the centre of it all. When we arrived there the army was there in Germiston, there was a war, the Marikana battle is not a battle, a big battle in Germiston because we were fighting with everybody, our own fellow employees who are working and us who are not working, the police, other unions, it was just something you haven't seen before. The fight took about five hours. I remember I was taken to BBH hospital during the day, but there .., the hospital was full of us and others were dead and others were to die and so forth, others disappeared and others were arrested. That day was normal day in Railway life, 22 April 1987, a very bad day indeed, seriously a bad day. We have people today walking with big scars, others have no limbs, others have no eyes. You remember out of it .., 38 of us were arrested, went to John Voster Square and later on some of us were released but 12 of us were given life sentences. Makhadi and the others, they were 12. And of course they went to Robben Island and some of us remained, but finally SARWU was recognised. And instead of R137 which our workers were paid, after the signing of the agreement, the salary of general workers went to R339 and all of us went back to work except three, three did not, actually I was the third one because these other two were old, in actual fact when we went on strike they were left with three days to go on pension. They did not come back they were going on pension. We negotiated their pension and they left. I was one of those they said .., there is a book called SARWU The Fighting Union, at the back of it you will get the history of Germiston. It is called Robert Mashego Massacre, I was identified as this troublesome one who killed a lot of

people, for whatever reason he was not killed or arrested, but he was arrested and not found guilty to go to Robben Island.

So out of it, the benefit is that yard officials who were paid about R333 went to R3000, those who were at R100 and something went to R300 and something rand. So benefits were there, we started now to have your pension fund, you have got your medical aid, your housing allowance and so forth and so on. So we were now recognised as truly employees of Railways out of that strike. Even though in 1989 they started to revert back to say they recognise us by default but we fought again for two months and .., we benefited a lot out of the 1987 strike, quite a lot.

Facilitator: Yourself, you raised through the ranks of SARWU and then later SATAWU and so on. Were you viewed by your co-workers at the person who is militant, or was it just some stroke of luck that you went through some ranks?

Respondent: I am no longer a shop steward now, I'm in this office which is the capital office, this is the office of capitalists.

Facilitator: the office of power?

Respondent: Ja, there is a problem in SATAWU as you know, there is a breakaway, Mphahele and the others. I am a SATAWU person by blood. I attended their CEC now, I was part of their delegation to COSATU Congress that elected people like Vavi back, I am part of the people who are rebuilding the organisation. The union structures in South Africa still recognise me, I can call one of them on the speaker phone now they recognise me as President, even the general secretary of SATAWU comrade Zenzo Mahlangu still address me as the president. When I left SATAWU I did not leave because it was bad, I left it in the congress in Mafikeng because this office needed me full time. So I could not work here and somewhere else. In my

farewell party, which is at that picture, that is myself and President Zuma, that was my farewell party in the congress of SATAWU in Mafikeng. They gave me a brand new Quantum and said to me these are your wheels, go and do work for the Metro and they gave me the ordinary status, ordinary membership of SATAWU. When I left people cried literally, I cried myself because I knew no other life outside SATAWU. I grew up there, I know only my life being a railway worker. So it was emotion, it is still emotional with me. I can bet you now, SATAWU is me, I am SATAWU, I have no other life outside SATAWU. If was made to choose between this office and the office of SATAWU, tomorrow I would go to SATAWU.

Facilitator: So SATAWU came in as a matter of T and G?

Respondent: Remember when we merged first it was in 1998, SARWU, BLATU and UTATU these were unions of Railways. We had about 12 unions then, but black people were in UTATU were coloured and Indians, BLATU were blacks, SARWU was also black. So we merged these three unions and we then said that the union's name shall be South African Transport and Allied Workers Union because we didn't want to use the old names, so we had a new name. Then in 2000 SATAWU merged with T and G. One of the names adopted was SATAWU. So the SATAWU we are talking about today is a merger of SATAWU and T and G.

Facilitator: During these mergers was there no struggle for power because lost their positions and so on?

Respondent: There are people that I must thank, that led without their personal interests ..., comrade June Dube who is now the Acting President of SATAWU was the president of T and G and knew that the possibility of him no longer being president exist. He is the one who felt that we must have a merger between SATAWU and T and G to form SATAWU. Randall Howard was the general secretary of T and G, he knew, there is no way that when we merged they will get the president and the

general secretary. But in SATAWU's point of view there was Ezo Mabyana who was the president of SATAWU, who also did not fear that. Johnson Gamede was the general secretary. I know I was forming part of the negotiating team but I was not at the national office, I was the provincial chairperson which was the regional chairperson then. So but the crux was that fundamentally, June, Randal, Mabyane, Johnson could they have decided to save guard their positions we could not have merged. I know I was one of those that at some point was opposed to the mergers, solely on the basis of power .., you will remember that T and G was now starting to organise members of SARWU who were transport workers, for instance road, freight, bull dogs and the others who were working at ..(unclear) – so we were looking at T and G as counter revolutionary because they were organising our members when in actual fact they were not our members because we were only organising Railways, not people doing work for the Railways and they were not organising Railways, but it was on the strength of being shallow minded at that moment in time. Yes power struggle was there because obviously when you come to provinces also .., I knew that I might not become the chairperson out of the merger because if I am the chairperson it means the regional secretary cannot be the regional secretary. There was a power struggle. But we were very committed to have one union, one industry in one federation and one transport union in South Africa. So we were not driven by positions, but yes fear was there but we were ready to take the challenge.

Facilitator: And when you look back, I know as you said earlier SATAWU, when you talk about it you get emotional because you are more or less the child of SATAWU, what were the major achievements, because you've now left?

Respondent: Look, SATAWU is today one of the five biggest unions in COSATU today and SATAWU, you can't talk of transport in this country without talking about SATAWU. At some point you will remember that SATAWU was the president of the International Transport Federation of the World, ITF, president being Randall Howard. We are serving in quite a lot of international structures, I at some point was serving a Railwayman's Union which is based in GBR, Germany and I was the deputy president in the union. So SATAWU is in actual fact, even now we've got Abner

Ramagolo who is an Africa chairperson of ITF, we have Veronica Maseja, we have quite a number of our leaders leading in SADC, Africa and the world representing the interests of transport workers in the country. But you will also know that if you look at the history of achievement, just now, we have signed a 19% wage agreement with road freight. Of course in three year phases, we have today the wage determination of the security sector, we have the wage determination of the taxi industry, we have the wage determination of cleaning sector. All these exist as a result, I was in actual fact involved in it .., because when I was still deputy president of SATAWU, my sectors which were given to me was cleaning and security. I can bet you that we found those sectors being very disorganised. Today they are the most successful security sectors, your cleaning sector. They have got determinations determined by the ministers as to what they must be paid and so forth. Transnet can't decide, for instance you will realise that one of the directors of South African Express Services which is part of South African Airways, one of their directors is Esrom Mabyana, our former president. It is in recognition of .., June is now the Chairperson of the SITA, of transport. We are there in the market, SATAWU as a name is there all the time, whether .., of course we might be failing to do things because people are not gifted the same way but the union is recognised. Some of us, some of our members will be pronounced now as directors, board of directors of South African Airways, you will hear the names, one or two very soon. We are in the market, SATAWU is definitely the force to be reckoned with. So there are a lot of things that can be said about SATAWU.

Facilitator: And the breakaway from SATAWU and also when you look at NUM there's also a break away, the Armcor guys, are the wheels coming off for COSATU?

Respondent: Look and here I am talking with authority because I was asked to go and do some research and look at what are the real issues. You will have heard Cappy yesterday saying that at some point, the Chairperson of MKVH, of the veterans, that at some point we must name and shame these people that are funding this thing because there is no worker struggle happening in Marikana, no worker struggles happening in SATAWU, no worker struggles happening in .., SAMWU

was about to go on strike now, it is a deliberate effort to pursue a different opinion on the outcome of Mangaung that is at play here, it has got nothing to do with worker struggles. And I think management of the unions, more especially of the mines have made a big mis-calculation because once you start undermining your recognised way of communicating to workers and you start giving back pocket offers, you are creating a big problem. The problem started with management of the unions, of the mines started giving concessions to individuals that come with leaders all of a sudden. But do they have an effect? For instance the SATAWU one, when we went to Mafikeng, where I was presiding over that conference, you can go back to that congress of Mafikeng in Sun City, where I was standing, I am the only one who chaired the whole conference because I had no interest of standing. So others were tense. If you look at that building, going into that conference, there were people who were supposed to be suspended and charged when we got into the conference, one of them is Ephraim Mphahlele who became the president, for misuse of funds of the unions for the campaigns they are doing, for instance we knew that there were t-shirts made by certain groupings, even employers for that matter, money was given to them, they were using cars that were bought by a certain individual within COSATU unions to destabilise SATAWU, so we ..., so now in order for them not to be suspended, certain things were done, for instance ..(unclear) did not allow that process of declaring them, suspending them with immediate in the congress because we were supposed to do that. I was the only one mandated by the ..(unclear) to give those facts. I still have the envelope here but I will not give it to you. It has suspensions of the people. But they did not allow it to happen because they knew if they do not deliver the congress to the bosses that were paying them there was going to be trouble.

Last week I was in the SAA where Mphahlele is working, where Reuben is working, where Liva is working, he is not working for SAA but he's working at the airport. They are not ..., we have just launched again the National Aviation Sector last week, we have re-elected full time shop stewards there. So no, the wills of COSATU unions are not coming off. That will never happen, of course the ..., remember SATAWU has got quite a number of break aways, you will remember that SARWU when we merged with T and G and with BLATU and NTATU, there was a SARWU breakaway, people like

Calvin Mteketela and the likes, Pholo they broke away, did we die? No, when we dismissed Steven Mtengwa, there was TAWU broke away, did we die? No, when we dismissed somebody from Mpumalanga, I forget his name who was dismissed by me in the hearing, he broke away with some people, in actual fact we were stopped to go to a company in Nelspruit in Mpumalanga, TSB, we were stopped, Mathebula Bus Service, because that man was an organiser there when we dismissed him. Of late we dismissed a gentleman called Jackson Simon, he opened his own security union. And now the break away by .., in actual fact what is so called NATAWU is no longer recognised as a union. It is not registered, there is something called what movement. So they themselves have got their own problems, identity problems. Do they have an effect yes, do they have an impact no. They are very small in number, they are busy going up and down, they are not recognised by anybody. At the end or beginning of the year next year, workers would have come clear of what it is that NATAWU is, because there is no NATAWU that is recognised. Armcor, I mean the gentleman of Armcor, I know he was dismissed by NUM for doing wrong things. He is now being used by other people that are opposed to the strength of NUM in the mines, and I mean history is there, you can see people like Malema. I went to the Eastern Cape where people were boasting that no we have given Marikana people Muti but they are refusing it. I was told point blank that if you want muti to be invisible come here, ask the Marikana people. And fortunately when I was coming back from Mbizana, driving to Durban Airport, I was driving in a kombi with a lot of other comrades, a kombi was stopped in front of me, the police were searching, just as you move from the Wild Coast hotel, we were stopped and they were searing, a kombi was found full of ammunition, guns, pangas, all types of methods, they were asked where they were going they all said they are going to Marikana and they were moving from Bizana to Marikana with ammunition. So it's not workers .., that's why you will find that most of the people who were killed and injured at Marikana were not employed by the mines. How did they arrive there, they tell you they are supporting their brothers/sisters, how can you have a strike of supporters. So it is people who are funded, and this is what happened in 1987, we know as SARWU that the people that were injured and killed and arrested in Germiston, most of them were from Namibia, others were coming from Swaziland, who never worked for the Railways before but they were fighting here in defence of the Railways as non South African citizens. When we were fighting with people at

the Railway stations, we will know the history, the people we fought with at our stations, at our trains were never employed by Railways, this is the same thing. We understand this thing from SARWU or from SATAWU, it is not surprising us, we don't believe that this smaller group of people will derail COSATU. Of course we will not allow people like Armcor to come back, members that are being misled will realise the truth and come back to the COSATU unions, because only COSATU unions can represent people better, nothing more, nothing less.

Facilitator: As the workers who joined government from you can say from presidential level, Motlanthe, other ministers and then at this level, provincial government, local level, do you think that you've made your impact in the government system?

Respondent: Ja you see this is my structure. Look, yes and no because there are people who came unaware or unprepared that they are coming to a jungle. They believed they are coming to a smooth sailing pot wherein recognition is given. I am lucky because I've been a councillor since 1994, I was a councillor of Brakpan Local Council, council of Ekurhuleni when it started in 2000 until today, I understood the challenges of being a councillor and the challenges of being an employer and at the same time an employee, because once you are a councillor you are an employer of SAMWU members. And when you are at SATAWU you are now becoming an employee of Transnet and therefore your benefits and rights differs. If you don't understand them you are going to have a problem. The good of for instance Kgalema Motlanthe, Gwede Mantashe, Ebrahim Patel, is that when you are a national office bearer of a union, you are a manager of a union, all employees of the unions are your employees. So you in actual fact you start to represent the employer body being at the union. And of course you are managing managerial skills in managing people, for instance NUM with 354 000 members are managed by the president, the general secretary in order for them to sing the same song. When I was still deputy president I was managing the 187 000 members of SATAWU and of course the employees of SATAWU in general. So but if you have just come in, at a leadership level, you still think like an ordinary worker on the street, you

are going to have problems and you have not participated in the structures of the ANC. Fortunately I have been an REC member of the ANC since the unbanning. I was an REC member of the ANC in the PWV which was chaired by Kgalema immediately after the unbanning, since then I've been an REC. There was one time of course here where there was vote of no confidence, and was not voted in, the issue was resolved but I came back in. I am an REC member today, so I'm in the structures of the ANC I understand them better, and of course people like Kgalema would understand they've been members of the ANC but of course we are not the same, there are still those that are still grappling with understanding the politics of being the employer and the politics of being the employee and the moving together parallel. For instance I know there is a gentleman called Eric Nyekemba who was an organiser of NUMSA, he is now a committee member of Labour in the National Parliament. I mean you will know that the then president of SACTU Shephard Mdladlana was the Minister of Labour, so we expect them to use the skills and the knowledge acquired in their capacity as shop stewards and as president to .., of course you are not going to get power on the place here, you must swell the ranks, don't allow the ranks to swell you because they swell you you will then become a pawn. Some of us are refusing to be pawns and fortunately I'm the chief whip, a position of power, politics of power, not about administrative power. I represent the ANC politically. So I am clear. But I don't know what would happen if I was an MMC or a Mayor I might act differently because politics are not the same, but at the chief whip's office this is an ANC office, everything I do is what the ANC says I must do. All of the 125 councillors of the ANC, inclusive of the mayor and speaker, take line of ANC from me. So to me it's still political work I am pursuing.

Facilitator: But your departure from SATAWU and Chris Dlamini's departure from FOSATU, later COSATU and Jay Naidoo's departure from COSATU to government and others as well, has that created a void in the unions or ..?

Respondent: Very much it did, yes, but didn't we expect it, we did. Remember we took a decision, when the ANC drafted the document in 1993 called Ready to Govern, we were part of the discussions. We were very clear that at that time that

there shall come a time when we are going to be part of government. Some, because remember there we were saying COSATU will bring the names to the party because we realised that the cream, de la cream of trade unions shall join the other side of being now in government. That's why we said in the discussions that we want to take over the production means from the haves to the not haves, we could not have taken that from the haves outside the structure of the haves. We must mix with them, debate and extract from them what they have and distribute it equally to the not haves. We could only do that by being part of it. If we stay here and shout from the corner and believe that things will change on their own we were wrong. So we needed to be inside. The intention was simply to do that. And of course you will not have a Jay Naidoo in COSATU today, you will not have a Kgalema Motlanthe in the NUM, we would not have the Gwede Mantashe in the NUM, you will not have Ebrahim Patel in SACTU, you will not have Robert Mashego in SATAWU. However we have a responsibility to be, go back there and help the unions not to.., and I doubt even in COSATU if .., fortunately I played a role for Zweli's to be re-elected today because I thought that if Zweli is leaving, you might even see the worse of what you are saying now, that not only the void, but the dwindling down. At least people like Sdumo I've been with them, they will know there were the Mantashes before, so a total hand over and infusing of new leaders is necessary. We are not preparing ourselves properly for that thing. That's why you find you wake up in the morning we have total new leadership that does not understand where we are going, a typical example is what SARWU did. Just took a person from the street, who has never been a leader of any sizeable structure, make him a president, being the president himself complains of the suppression, and run away from the union that he is the head, president, nobody else, everybody accounts to you but you run away. It is because people were not prepared for what is expected of them. The two chairperson and deputy chair of the biggest province of Gauteng run away and say they are suppressed, how? It is because they were not ready and who must be blamed, sometimes ourselves who left because we did not create space for them to grow and to be the second layer of leadership for them to can fit into the glove. If I came in and fitted as a national office bearer of SATAWU when there were other people before me, it means they allowed me to grown. Did I allow others to grow, are we presently allowing everybody, even at the ANC. The issue of saying Robert Mashego is the deputy, for instance the Thabo Mbeki, Nelson Mandela era, when Nelson

Mandela left, Thabo Mbeki took over as the president, can you do that today? No you will find somebody from Mpumalanga wanting to contest to be the president when there is a deputy. So it means we are not preparing anybody.

In China they don't do that, they are very clear. The SG of the party is going to run the country, the deputy SG is the deputy president. When the other one goes, this one gets in, they give you a time. Here we don't, at union level, at municipal level, we don't do it. A chief whip has got a deputy but when we want a chief whip after he leaves it's not the deputy that becomes the chief whip, it will be somebody who speaks loud somewhere in the corner, who wants to come and learn. When he is here he calls for "I need an induction" he is sitting in this office, he must run, he wants to be inducted, he contests the presidency, when he is elected he asks for the hand over. Why did you avail yourself when you don't understand what is expected of you, now you want an induction. It's better if people are .., you are now inside here you can do work but you still want to be developed, learning is a subjective matter, you must learn at all times. But for you to come and sit and say no I'm now the chief whip I want to be inducted (phone rang) it won't help.

Facilitator: Just as a closing word, is there anything else that you think is important which should have been part of this interview?

Respondent: Ja look, I think we .., I will want to request trade unions in particular, to go back to the basics of the trade union movement, allow our shop stewards basic shop steward training, allow our leadership to go for leadership courses, but leadership courses determined by trade union needs, not the capitalist training, that trade unions should respect worker control, very important. For instance today you hear people say it's the COSATU boss, and the boss they are talking about is Zwelinzima Vavi, that's not the COSATU way. In COSATU the boss of COSATU is the president. And even here .., and I don't understand why because nowadays, even in the ANC, the SG's position is becoming powerful, I don't understand where does that come from because if you follow the history of the 12 presidents of the ANC,

starting from OR Tambo, everybody that you can quote ..., I can ask you who was the general secretary of ..., besides of course you might find the issue of the general secretary, the founding general secretary being Presly Kasim, but all others you don't remember because they were not a factor. Factors were the presidents of the ANC, factors were the chairpersons of the ANC in the six regions. Nowadays it's not the case, the issue is about David Makhura, Kgalema Motlanthe, it's not about where the power lies, the power lies in the presidents, the power lies in the chairpersons. I want to request that where ever we go we must promote this thing that worker control in trade union movement must be understood but also that the presidency and the chairperson's positions in the party the ANC should be ploughed back because in the absence of it, the operations of the organisations loses it's meaning. It becomes that people are joined, the ANC joins people, it's no longer people that joins the ANC because if you join the ANC you must follow what the ANC says to you. But nowadays each and everyone of us who is at the helm, bring his understanding of what the ANC shall mean, what COSATU shall mean, what SATAWU shall mean, and it must not because we've got the constitution, we have got rules and regulations that we have adopted. Let's just go back to the basics and it is important, now today a Railway worker will no longer join SARWU because SARWU fought in 1987 they want to see something different, the SATAWU that represent their interest clearly ... I want to ask even the ANC and COSATU that we seem to be copying from the DA or from FEDUSA, things that DA and FEDUSA realise that is failing for instance. The majority of our leaders today tell us that we must be modernised, we must be ..., I am surprised that you are writing, leaders today don't write, they use this thing only they don't write, if you leave here and you lose this thing then you are finished. The majority of our members believe that communication by technology is the best. It is not, ask DA, that is why DA is now copying from us, they go door to door. They get into our houses and ask our parents to vote for them. In those days they would go and write you a letter and ask you to join them. they've realised that it does not work, they are coming door to door with us. FEDUSA is now having general meetings and public meetings of their members – they never had those, it was COSATU who was doing it, talking to people. Our members want to see you talking to them, they want to ask you questions, they want to swear at you and see your reaction when you are angry and say no this is our leader. This thing of writing papers and emailing is not COSATU way, that's why

people choose between FEDUSA and COSATU because COSATU is congress, it speaks to its people as compared to the issue of writing emails. With email, if you remember when the Indian congress taught the ANC, door to door then, people like baba Selope Thema, David Bopape, were taught by Indian Congress, by bicycle house to house, family by family, we are lazy today, we want to speak over the phone. When we organised SARWU in 1983/84 there were no cell phones. In the Railways we had one phone in the office of the manager, all of us didn't have phones, so you could not even phone people at work, you had to go to their houses, in the compound, in the hostels, where ever they stayed, nowadays we are lazy. Let us go back to that route, to speak to our members, call public meetings. I used to call general meetings every month at Delmore Hostel, every month and I was .., we were expecting that each and every branch of SARWU .., because we had nine branches, all the towns, Springs, Benoni, Brakpan, Boksburg, Germiston, Jo'burg, Vaal, all of them must have public meetings once a month and then we will have a bigger regional public meeting once a month at Delmore. So every week they had their meetings, once a month they come and tell me as the chairperson of the region what are the branches saying. It is no longer happening. In the ANC during the time of the bigger branches, Thembisa, Kempton Park, Germiston, Kotlehong branches, nowadays you have got 102 branches here but we are failing to tell our people what is it that the ANC want of them. Why? It is because we are talking over the writings, in actual fact the ANC decide on the basis of what the press is saying because our people speak to Metro FM, write to Sowetan, they are not speaking to the members, that's why you can find provincial and national structures saying we want Zuma and the branches have not spoken. The branches must speak, even in the ANC, in SATAWU you will find a province waking up and saying the we want President Mashego the president of SATAWU but what are the workers saying themselves because they must say it through their branches, through their regions which is provinces in SATAWU and in the national congress they nominate. We are no longer doing it that way nowadays, somebody stand up in the morning and say I am ready to be the president therefore you want to nominate him, no it has never been like that. Workers identified their own leaders and would nominate them, and they will grow like that. I know that during the time I was at Gauteng, then Southern Transvaal, we were holding regional congresses every year, I was elected ten times, ten years in succession, every year unopposed.

Facilitator: Thank you very much let me free you.

Respondent: thanks very much

END

Collection Number: A3402

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

PUBLISHER:

Publisher: Historical Papers Research Archive, University of the Witwatersrand

Location: Johannesburg

©2016

LEGAL NOTICES:

Copyright Notice: All materials on the Historical Papers website are protected by South African copyright law and may not be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, displayed, or otherwise published in any format, without the prior written permission of the copyright owner.

Disclaimer and Terms of Use: Provided that you maintain all copyright and other notices contained therein, you may download material (one machine readable copy and one print copy per page) for your personal and/or educational non-commercial use only.

People using these records relating to the archives of Historical Papers, The Library, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, are reminded that such records sometimes contain material which is uncorroborated, inaccurate, distorted or untrue. While these digital records are true facsimiles of paper documents and the information contained herein is obtained from sources believed to be accurate and reliable, Historical Papers, University of the Witwatersrand has not independently verified their content. Consequently, the University is not responsible for any errors or omissions and excludes any and all liability for any errors in or omissions from the information on the website or any related information on third party websites accessible from this website.

This document forms part of a collection, held at the Historical Papers Research Archive, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa.