

Georgina Saohatse

Facilitator: This is an interview with Georgina Saohatse we are in Reckland Bloemfontein, the date is 2 July 2011 interview is done by Brown Maaba. Mama tell me your background as to where you were born and how you were raised and how you ended up in the world of unions?

Respondent: I was born on 30 March 1949, my parents are the late Ntate and Mme Mokgadi, I was born in Batho Location. I schooled until high school, Grade 10, this is when I started working and got involved in politics

Facilitator: At school?

Respondent: No at work. I worked for a company called Flemish Linen and House, this is when I got involved in politics. I was elected as a shop steward at Flemish Linen and House, the union was SAAWU, which was a general union at the time. I was fired for my involvement in union activities. I then started by assisting at the SAAWU office until I formed the Domestic Workers Union, it was called SADWA, this is when I started working at the union office. I worked for the Domestic Workers Union from 1984 until 1998. I left and went to the constituency office of Ntate Letshesa Tsindi, I worked there for a year. This is when I joined FAWU, I was interviewed and joined FAWU from 1999 to date. I want to go back to the union called SAAWU, as indicated it was a general union. Unions like FAWU, SATAU, SACAWU, NEHAWU, all the unions that are affiliated under COSATU were affiliated to SAAWU. When COSATU was launched for the first time, the unions were then divided into the industries, our union changed from SADWA to SAADUU, the Domestic Workers Union.

Facilitator: going back mama, what kind of family are you from, rich or poor?

Respondent: I'm from a poor family

Facilitator: school, you studied until which grade?

Respondent: Standard 9 which is now called standard 9

Facilitator: why did you leave school?

Respondent: I left school because of family problems. My father worked alone and had three children. It was an effort for me to study up to Grade 10, I had to go and look for work. My parents did not want me to leave school but I took the decision to do so in order to help my family. At the time he worked for the municipality and the salaries were low.

Facilitator: your first job, where did you work?

Respondent: I worked for PP which was a restaurant in the 1970s, mid 1970s

Facilitator: how was the environment and how long did you work there?

Respondent: things were difficult when I worked there, the owners were Portuguese and we had to work long hours at and worked from outside making chips that is why today we have diseases like arthritis, we used a lot of water and worked outside, after cutting the chips and preparing fish one could only go inside. One was doing three people's job alone

Facilitator: how long did you work there?

Respondent: I think I worked there for two years

Facilitator: so at that time were there union issues?

Respondent: at the time there were no unions

Facilitator: why did you leave the restaurant?

Respondent: I left the union when I got a job at Masego Ntho national hospital

Facilitator: here in Bloemfontein?

Respondent: Yes unfortunately when I joined the hospital I realised I was pregnant the first month and was able to work for three months and had to leave. After that this is when I joined Flemish Linen

Facilitator: did you have maternity leave at the time?

Respondent: no there was no such, you were fired if you were pregnant in Portuguese restaurant that is why I left before they realised I was pregnant, when they realised you were pregnant they would fire you. Even at the national hospital they did not have maternity leave benefits

Facilitator: so how long did you stay at the hospital?

Respondent: three to four months, not very long

Facilitator: after that what happened?

Respondent: That is when I joined Flemish Linen House (Flamse linen huis)

Facilitator: when was this, still in the 1970s?

Respondent: I cant remember, I think it was in the early 1980s

Facilitator: what kind of work did you do?

Respondent: I was a packer. What we did was sew linen, curtains, table cloths, I was packing the linen sets

Facilitator: how were the working conditions in this industry?

Respondent: the conditions were fine except the salary was low, there wasn't a lot of pressure as long as you did your job well. At the time I was earning R30 which was very little, the tailors were earning R45 they were considered to be the best.

Facilitator: So did you have a union there?

Respondent: This is where we joined SAWU and I was elected as a shop steward

Facilitator: who introduced the union to the company or was it in existence when you joined?

Respondent: White Sabien from the union came to us and organised us during lunch time. He told us about the union but we were so afraid, we were worried about the employer, if you steal he would beat you up so we were worried he was going to beat us up. So as he was explaining to us I was the first one who showed an interest. I told the others that what is the point of working in a nice environment whilst we are not happy with the salary package. At the end of the month we took peanuts home. So that is how we joined SAWU.

Facilitator: Did the employer welcome the union?

Respondent: They wanted to fire all of us more especially me because everyone thought I was the instigator and that I am the one who brought the union. We had coloured workers who would run to the boss and inform him that I am the instigator. He fired 7 of us, that is when I started working at the union office until I formed the Domestic Workers Union, at the time it was SACTU at the time.

Facilitator: For how long were you a shop steward?

Respondent: about six months, but the union was not recognised

Facilitator: what were the workers burning issues at that time?

Respondent: the salaries were bad, the conditions were not so bad, all the workers wanted was better salaries, when we worked overtime he would pay us but the salary was just too little, we wanted a living wage to earn what other factory workers were earning.

Facilitator: so after six months you were fired?

Respondent: Yes he fired 6 of us, my sister in law also worked there, she decided to leave with me.

Facilitator: so did the others remain?

Respondent: yes they remained, most of them were coloured. After we were fired, it was in August, in December the same year the company closed for the xmas recess and when the workers returned in January the employer was gone

Facilitator: so it was a blessing in disguise for you to leave?

Respondent: Yes, we were told he went back to farming, he had farms. The other thing that bothered us was that he would take us to go and work on his farm. He would take you to go and work at the farm and not pay overtime. These were one of the things we were not happy with. The locals in the area were unemployed and he did not want to employ them that is why he wanted us to work on his farm.

Facilitator: Tell me the process followed when the Domestic Workers Union was formed?

Respondent: A lady from Vereeniging, Mme Elsie, she called the SAWU office in Free State and wanted a person who can form a Domestic worker's union. At the time domestic workers had completed forms at our offices and then I told her that I already had about 42 members. I was then invited to unity talks on domestic workers. I started organising domestic workers, I was travelling alone with taxis, there were no hotels in those days, I would find a

place to sleep for the night. That is how we operated. SADU grew, I left the union because I worked for six years with no pay and my husband was also unemployed. So I had to leave. I continued to organise until I got the job with the constituency office.

Facilitator: how was it, were people willing to join?

Respondent: To date I still have great respect for people living in the townships and the few men who are working as domestic workers. They were willing to join, our office was busy all the time. We also organised a march to the Labour Department, they were all wearing their ANC aprons proudly. Domestic workers today found things in place but I am still proud of those domestic workers that joined the unions in those years

Facilitator: what were the burning issues within this particular sector of domestic workers because it is different from FAWU?

Respondent: They were working abnormal hours and earning very little, the burning issue was what they were paid. In some cases the worker has a visitor who also brings children, in some cases the visitor has booked at a hotel so the domestic worker must do the washing at no extra cost. They were also working long hours and were not given day offs. Most of them as you know are sleep ins, so they live on the employer's premises. Sometimes they are not from Bloemfontein, they are only given one weekend off, they knock off late on a Friday and have to return by Sunday, they had very little time with their families. So the union requested that they be given the day off on Friday so that they can spend some time with their families and return on Monday morning. Some of them did not even get the weekend off.

Facilitator: The issues of maternity leave with domestic workers, what happened?

Respondent: In those days there were no maternity leave benefits, although it was not lawful they were covered by something called common something, the Labour Relations Act did not cover them. Common Law permitted maternity leave. Most of them had to strike in order to get the maternity leave, employers were not forced to give them maternity leave.

Facilitator: so did the gardeners also form part of domestic workers?

Respondent: yes

Facilitator: what were the gardeners challenges? What were they exactly?

Respondent: They did not work everyday like domestic workers except those that were employed by companies. Those that did not work for companies were not happy with what they were being paid, sometimes they would be paid R10 a day. They joined the union because they were also fired from time to time like domestic workers with no notice.

Facilitator: what about exploitation in this sector, was it an issue or ..?

Respondent: A big issue, the exploitation was more than the word exploitation, the domestic workers. Some employers would employ women to carry building material when they were building or renovating

Facilitator: was it easy to organise strikes in this sector because people worked separately, it's not like they work in a plant, they are working in people's houses. Was it easy to organise a strike in this sector?

Respondent: It was not easy, we tried to but realised that they can be easily fired.

Facilitator: how were you going to convince the employers to meet your demands if you can't organise strikes, it's a different sector completely?

Respondent: The march assisted us a lot, one time we picketed as domestic workers for work clothing and told the employer our needs

Facilitator: so you started as SADU and then later it became SAWU?

Respondent: it was from SAWU and became SADWA, from SADWA when it was launched under COSATU it became SADWU, it was an association but it became a union

Facilitator: Was SADWA affiliated under FOSATU?

Respondent: No, quite a few other unions also organised domestic workers, so we merged. In places like Durban/Jo'burg we got together and formed this giant union of domestic workers.

Facilitator: so you were there for about six years?

Respondent: where SADWA, no SADWA I was there for 14 years

Facilitator: you were there for 14 years?

Respondent: Remember when SADWA merged with SADU I was with them for 14 years

Facilitator: but you mentioned that initially you were not paid for 6 years?

Respondent: yes I was not paid for six years, I used to travel, if they had money they would send money to us so that we can organise union members until it was dissolved

Facilitator: it was dissolved?

Respondent: yes

Facilitator: why it's an important union?

Respondent: because of financial constraints

Facilitator: so at the moment there is no union for ..?

Respondent: there is a union. As indicated I told you that we were not paid for six years, we carried on and organised domestic workers – at the moment we have SADAWU

Facilitator: when you look back at domestic workers union, do you think you've made the best contribution?

Respondent: yes and I'm proud of it, I did it that is why I'm saying although I struggled for the six years, my heart was with the domestic workers. I could relate with my mother as a domestic worker. I wanted to see a difference in the lives of domestic workers.

Facilitator: what were the main achievements when you look back?

Respondent: Domestic workers have UIF now like other workers, they also have leave, day offs etc., they also qualify for maternity leave now

Facilitator: when you look back what are the failures?

Respondent: the failure was misusing of funds, domestic workers were paid very little, but the officials especially national office bearers would fly to Durban/Cape Town and other areas, I felt this was unnecessary because they could have travelled by train there was no need for them to fly until when COSATU resolved that unions should not be funded overseas funders.

Facilitator: and some of the outstanding women in this sector who are they? Do you remember them?

Respondent: The domestic worker union is blessed, most of them are still there, Mama Selina, Mkhwanazi, Eunice Dladla who is presently the GS now, they are based in Johannesburg now, Sesi Nora left Pretoria, in Durban I don't know them they are fairly new, Cape Town Metal Witboois is still there, he is the National Treasurer, those are the people I worked with, others I have not met they joined after I left

Facilitator: what kind of contributions did they make which is outstanding?

Respondent: We fought with them through the problems we were faced with, we made a decision not to leave the union even though it was dissolved by COSATU but we will continue organising the workers until such time we are well organised and then go back to COSATU. My contribution .., I am the one who met with Mme Joseph (Helen Joseph) – when she looked at the delegates list she picked my name because I was working for the Domestic Workers Union, she met with me at lunch time and promised to fund us so that we can rebuild the union. I am the one who introduced Mrs

Joseph to our head office – the name SASAWU was from here in the Free State.

Facilitator: the issue of racism was it an issue in this sector?

Respondent: Yes a lot in the Free State

Facilitator: so the domestic workers were affected by such things?

Respondent: yes

Facilitator: In terms of legal representation, how did you deal with the cases?

Respondent: I dealt with the cases, the unions were placed in one place, so I was using CCMA through the back door. SACAWU or any other union would deal with my case until it is resolved by the CCMA. There was a commissioner from Johannesburg who changed things

Facilitator: do you think the Labour Laws of today protect the workers especially in the domestic sector?

Respondent: I'm not sure because it's been a while since I left them

Facilitator: when did you leave SADU exactly, was it after 14 years?

Respondent: yes

Facilitator: when was it 1992/91?

Respondent: no I left in 1994, can't remember the years but constituency office I remember I started in 1998

Facilitator: and you went to join FAWU?

Respondent: yes

Facilitator: how were you introduced to FAWU?

Respondent: There was an advertisement so I applied for the position

Facilitator: what did you apply for?

Respondent: at that time it was Branch Administrator

Facilitator: and your impression of the union when you joined as an administrator what were the issues and challenges that you were faced with?

Respondent: It was completely different from Domestic Workers Union, I did not have a lot of challenges because as indicated, the unions were housed next to each other, so most of the time we assisted each other. I also assisted FAWU that is why I did not meet challenges when I joined them

Facilitator: if you say they were completely different what do you mean?

Respondent: what I mean is the sector is different to SADU

Facilitator: so what were the issues then?

Respondent: When I arrived the shop stewards operated differently, we didn't have shop stewards in the Domestic Workers Union because they were all working alone, so it was a new thing, to get into a company and become a shop steward, that was the difference

Facilitator: what are FAWU's present challenges today, post 1994?

There are challenges, the workers are still not happy with what they are being paid, they are also not happy with their conditions of employment, some of their challenges have not been addressed.

Facilitator: what about issues of unfair dismissals, do you have those kind of issues?

Respondent: yes to date we still have those challenges, FAWU has a legal department, white people do not want to change, they still behave like they did in the olden days

Facilitator: so they are continuing with what they did in the past?

Respondent: yes they continue to treat people badly

Facilitator: are the cases winnable?

Respondent: most of them because they start with the organiser, the legal department deals with cases that go as far as CCMA, consolation and arbitrations are handled by organisers, so should the case continue it is then sent to Labour court by Comrade Sondiyazi who is our legal representative.

Facilitator: What about issues of unprotected strikes, do you still have those problems?

Respondent: yes sometimes the workers get carried away with their emotions, they go on strike without informing the organiser, then this becomes a problem for the union. They don't happen a lot, most of the times the workers go through the proper channels.

Facilitator: Your involvement with unions did this not affect your family, you said that you travelled a lot for instance?

Respondent: at first my family was affected but as time went on, one day I appeared on TV not about labour issues, but about toyi toying – so my husband from that day decided not to complain anymore, he realised that I love my work. The worst thing that happened was when we were locked up for the State of Emergency, he asked me to stop my involvement and I told there is no going back because my heart is with the domestic workers. I was locked up for 37 nights.

Facilitator: what were you charged with?

Respondent: Nothing, we were just locked up, after 14 days we went for interrogation, after that we were locked up again, I was locked up for 37 days. Others were released after 14 days, they had agreed to work with the security branch. We were released after 37 days.

Facilitator: and the prison conditions, how were they?

Respondent: In our office, we were continuously harassed, every time they would walk into our offices and search – we didn't know what they were looking for because they never found anything. All the important documentation was not kept at the office. For instance when we organised SANDF staff, we kept the information away from the office because we knew

that time and again they would come and search, look at our files, threaten people and tell them that unions are not legal. So some people would resign if threatened by the police. Most workers disappeared during the state of emergency.

Facilitator: so when did this stop?

Respondent: Before 1994, from as early as 1990 they were very scarce, we didn't see them a lot, in 1991 they never came altogether.

Facilitator: what are the advantages of falling under COSATU as a union, you started with Domestic and then NEHAWU etc., and then affiliated under COSATU?

Respondent: It was important for unions to fall under one umbrella. If a worker is not happy with the union they belong to they will go to another union, if there is no response the person can contact head office, so this is extremely important.

Facilitator: In terms of the funds, is FAWU stable, you don't have the problems you had with Domestic, lack of funds and so on+

Respondent: No especially this new person, Masemola, he did his best. When I first arrived here there was no increase in our salaries for 3 years, we were told there is no money, so since the new leadership we get our increase every year. The new leadership also bought this building, they also bought a

flat in Jo'burg, in Cape Town and Durban (we were wondering where that money comes from if there's no funds)

Facilitator: he did his best

Respondent: ja he did

Facilitator: so Mama what do you think the future of unions should be? Should unions continue or should they be disbanded?

Respondent: I think unions must continue, I don't believe workers have freedom as yet, there are still a lot of challenges to date

Facilitator: what do you mean there are still challenges?

Respondent: Workers are still exploited today, not everyone is happy, there are still some challenges. For instance if we do not negotiate for workers to get an increase they do not get it, sometimes they ask for 8% they workers might offer only 5%.

Facilitator: When you look back was it worth it to be part of the unions?

Respondent: it was worth it, I am not sorry even though I am still struggling but I'm not sorry I went through what I went through

Facilitator: what do you think about union people joining government structures. In your view, is this an advantage of disadvantage?

Respondent: I believe it is a disadvantage because union is not a job, its' deployment, what happens after the contract period, after five years one does not have a job. Some do not have sabbatical leave. FAWU would grant me sabbatical leave, I was also a councillor at some stage.

Facilitator: so you have sabbatical leave here?

Respondent: yes we do have in FAWU, you must give good reasons

Facilitator: so what if you go and not come back, will they have issues about it?

Respondent: not really

Facilitator: but also was there a connection between the struggles of the workers and the township struggles?

Respondent: yes for instance on June 16 we would meet at labour, ANC was underground, at the time we had UDF, we would always meet. ANC Youth also worked with schools, they operated from FAWU offices. They would

make copies and type from the offices, we had no computers so they had to type

Facilitator: ja, back then. What about in service training, you left school at Standard 10 but you were in unions throughout. Were you guys trained over time on issues, legal issues?

Respondent: yes there was continuous training, even SADU, Domestic Workers, we were given training in Durban, Bloemfontein or other areas

Facilitator: what courses were offered?

Respondent: I can't remember but they were related to labour issues, different issues

Facilitator: In Bloemfontein who ran the courses?

Respondent: They would bring the people to train us, they would come here and we would attend the course and go back home, sometimes we would bring our blankets and sleep at the union office, we were never used to sleeping at hotels.

Facilitator: were the courses effective?

Respondent: very effective, because we came with no knowledge

Facilitator: do you think worker conditions changed after 1994?

Respondent: yes they did here and there but not everywhere

Facilitator: okay, what else needs to be done to make sure that there's complete change?

Respondent: A union is a union because of workers, if the workers are reluctant to join a union, it is difficult for the union to assist. For instance if you go to an organisation with 100 employees and only 30 join, the union does not have power. Organisers should organise workers so that the union can have power

Facilitator: why are people not interested in joining unions?

Respondent: I don't know, but the very same person who does not want to join when they pick up a problem they go straight to union offices. We tell them that we are only helping union members. Some would give an excuse about their white bosses giving them problems

Facilitator: the issue of labour brokers?

Respondent: that is a problem especially in FAWU

Facilitator: How did it affect you?

Respondent: not very much, it's companies like Sasko, Blue Ribbon also but it has moved to Thaba Nchu

Facilitator: so how are you going to deal with labour brokers eventually, about labour brokers or are you going to leave them as they are?

Respondent: we cannot leave them as they are because COSATU and other unions want to do away with labour brokers. Janses Meat Market also has labour brokers, they pay them as they wish. They are exploited more than the workers who are appointed by the company. The problem is there is no work.

Facilitator: During apartheid were stay aways supported here in Bloemfontein?

Respondent: very much so

Facilitator: is there anything else that you think is important we did not talk about here?

Respondent: I think we talked about everything

Facilitator: any closing word?

Respondent: I don't know what to say, I just agreed to the interview and do know why you interviewed me. I am happy that there are people showing an interest in union history, that is very important to me. People do not know the history of the union movement.

Facilitator: Thanks mama, I will explain to you now

END

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