

Sonti Motiang

Facilitator: This is an interview with Mama Songi Motiang, we are in Kempton Park, Norkem Park, the date is 10 May 2012, interview is done by Brown Maaba. Mama you were still saying when you started with the unions?

Respondent: I started in 1979 at the South African Allied Workers Union, SAAWU, an allied workers union meant it was general. The union taught us a lot, we learnt that there's a difference between when you are at work and at home. So you wear your uniform at work and take it off at home. This meant that we also served in community structures. With the COSATU formation whereby FOSATU and CAWU affiliated. I worked with people like Siza Njikelana, Thozamile Xweta, Sam Kikine, that is when COSATU was formed. COSATU then recommended that unions should be broken into the different sectors, for instance construction to be on its own, metal on its own, clothing on its own etc. So I joined the Construction and Allied Workers Union which was demarcated into three, I'm talking about construction; building and civil engineering. And then there was an integration in 2000, which was supposed to be a merger with NUM, National Union of Mineworkers. The general secretary at the time was Gwede Mantashe.

Facilitator: So you joined the union in 1979?

Respondent: Yes I started with SAAWU, as a shop steward

Facilitator: Where were you based, which firm or industry?

Respondent: I started working as an administrator

Facilitator: As an administrator, straight to SAAWU

Respondent: Yes

Facilitator: How were you introduced to SAAWU or to the unions?

Respondent: People who were serving underground like .., you don't mind if I .., what I mean you don't mind me mentioning people and so forth?

Facilitator: No it's up to you?

Respondent: Okay let me say there were these underground structures who introduced me. As I had indicated before struggle was not health and safety clothing whereby you are protecting yourself and so on, we also served in the community to fight high rates and taxes and so forth, strikes etc., remember there was a big strike of "tins" – I was also involved in that.

Facilitator: Where were your offices?

Respondent: At Thabethe's place in Thembisa

Facilitator: Why Thembisa, why not Jo'burg where you could attract people?

Respondent: I was based in Thembisa at the time, so we had offices in Thembisa, we had offices in Jo'burg and Pretoria, all over, East London etc.

Facilitator: And the challenges of running SAAWU, in 1979 that was just years after 1976, what were the challenges?

Respondent: Yes we had challenges because there were boycotts, we also had things like "Black Xmas " and so forth. The main challenge to us as a trade union was that people were underpaid so – and benefits were things that were not there by then, we struggled

Facilitator: Were people willing to join the unions?

Respondent: They were willing, although some of them were ..., participation was powerful, most of them did not understand what was happening but they went and supported us organisers. An organiser was considered to be a teacher, the fact that you could stand in front of people, understand their language and teach them the importance of having a trade union. What they lacked most was benefits, loans etc., they were not introduced

Facilitator: Did SAAWU manage to fight for worker benefits?

Respondent: Yes a lot

Facilitator: With all the firms or with certain firms?

Respondent: As I had indicated that SAAWU was a general union, we were catering for all sectors.

Facilitator: Which were the tougher sectors?

Respondent: Construction was tough because they would employ LDC's (Limited Duration of Contract), once the employer realises that a person is affiliated to a union they would make them sign a three month contract. There were no workers rights, the Labour Relations Act did not support trade unions, strikes were held haphazardly, it was the voice of the workers at the time.

Facilitator: What about issues around .., if you say construction was a difficult sector, what were the issues, was is exploitation, overwork etc.?

Respondent: Yes a lot, because the employer used to beat up the workers. A family man would come and report, they would be beaten up, at times not paid on time. Some companies would just disappear with their monies etc.

Facilitator: Did you manage to deal with some of the issues as a union?

Respondent: Some we did, to be honest we were not able to cover all the issues, but sometimes we were able to go to the Registrar of Companies and trace the companies and find them. They would assist us in finding out that the same company would be registered in different names. That was one of our challenges.

Facilitator: What about the other sectors like steel, food and allied if there was food?

Respondent: In food, mostly we dealt with farmers. The farmers would hide the workers for us. You would visit the farm today and next week the worker is no longer there.

Facilitator: Did you succeed to recruit in the farms considering those situations?

Respondent: Recruitment was very scarce especially in the food and allied industry, the employer would hide the workers and threaten them that they will not be fed and will not have a place to stay etc.

Facilitator: The decision to focus on all the sectors as SAAWU, how was it reached, why did you not focus on one sector?

Respondent: Membership was growing and worker interest, also some other goals we had reached attracted a lot of members for me. It was clear that workers would discuss us in their spare time in shebeens or at home how we assisted them and then everybody wanted to come and join us, members we had assisted talked about our successes and that is how we grew.

Facilitator: What about capacity in your offices, did you have enough capacity because you were dealing with all the sectors, the problems were different per sector?

Respondent: At the time we would recruit from underneath trees, also we had big problems with the police, they would rate our offices. So we would delegate people to different posts in different areas. Not all the shop stewards used the office

Facilitator: So you managed somehow

Respondent: The other problem was it was difficult to have everybody in the office, the subscriptions at the time was R1.40 per month which was not enough to accommodate everybody in the office. We also had a problem with retrenchments, when a person is retrenched obviously they can no longer pay subscriptions – we were paid very little salaries, we stayed on because of the passion and love for the workers, so we kept ourselves going.

Facilitator: So there was no alternative funding you only had subscriptions?

Respondent: Yes subscriptions only, sometimes people like Matthew would get funding for us, the funding was too little and did not make too much of a difference. In some instances if the funds are available they will be utilised to pay for the rent and attorneys who represented our workers. Some of the shop stewards were not well educated and in some instances we had to use services of an attorney, and also for training

Facilitator: So the training was also paid for using the same money?

Respondent: Yes

Facilitator: Do you think they got something out of the training?

Respondent: Yes they did. Today we have advocates and so forth, others are having their own businesses and so forth

Facilitator: So SAAWU didn't have its own internal labour division, you use to hire lawyers from outside?

Respondent: We did have but because of the growth in membership and our operations nationally we had to appoint attorneys to assist us.

Facilitator: So all the cases were done by ..?

Respondent: By ourselves and sometimes if we had to appear in the industrial court we needed an attorney to represent us – Thabo Morale would also help us sometimes. In the end we appointed him as our legal rep, our attorney, he had not completed his studies, the union decided to pay for his education whilst he worked for us.

Facilitator: The Recognition Agreements with different companies, did you manage to get them off the ground?

Respondent: Yes

Facilitator: Easily or you struggled?

Respondent: At that time you were compelled to register as a union, if the registration was delayed the companies would not accept us and wait for the registration to be completed, depending on the sector. We finally affiliated to COSATU whereby all industries were registered separately.

Facilitator: SAAWU was it sitting outside FOSATU, was it part of FOSATU or was it an independent union?

Respondent: It was an independent union

Facilitator: Why independent union, why not under FOSATU? What were the politics?

Respondent: Am I wrong or right? SAAWU I think was more into ANC if I can say, do you understand

Facilitator: But did you have external connections then as SAAWU with the ANC?

Respondent: Yes we did

Facilitator: What kind and what were the activities?

Respondent: You know that during that time there was point A and point B, and there was a way of communicating – we were not all communicating with the ANC underground.

Facilitator: You mentioned also just in passing, that there were other things that you had to deal with, things like Black Xmas and so on. I know what you are talking about and what you mean. For the sake of the record, what did this involve if you had to deal with Black Xmas?

Respondent: At the time everything had to do with the ANC recruitment. We were teaching workers what is the struggle is about. We knew that there were different political organisations – we were just pushing for all the banned organisations.

Facilitator: Access to literature, did you have access to literature?

Respondent: Yes, there was a structure called Umsebenzi and ..., you know as the facilities were not enough, everyone would bring whatever literature they had, you were not supposed to question what we were reading, that is the one I remember.

Facilitator: What about the police, did they not give you problems?

Respondent: As I was saying, they took our t-shirts and were constantly looking for us. Our offices were continuously searched and closed, we were sometimes forced to operate in the firms, we would also meet after working hours

Facilitator: But over time, did SAAWU grow or did it go down?

Respondent: It grew a lot as I have indicated

Facilitator: The formation of COSATU 1986, were you part of it, SAAWU?

Respondent: Yes we were part of it

Facilitator: But you remained as SAAWU you did not merge?

Respondent: We merged as I indicated that sectors were taken into consideration, I became part of the construction sector, Construction and Allied Workers Union, CAWU

Facilitator: That's after the formation of COSATU?

Respondent: Yes it was in 1987, CAWU was formed in 1987

Facilitator: What about the others, did they go to other sectors?

Respondent: Yes, SEPAWU

Facilitator: In SAAWU were you all in favour of being part of COSATU or did others have doubts?

Respondent: Mostly we were in favour of COSATU

Facilitator: Any reasons?

Respondent: By then COSATU, their ideology was different to that of FOSATU (interruption) –

Facilitator: You were still talking about COSATU was different from ..

Respondent: Yes the ideology of FOSATU and COSATU were different. Our first general secretary, I forget his name ..?

Facilitator: Jay Naidoo?

Respondent: He was in FOSATU at the time, they did not have the same ideology as COSATU, but in the end he became the general secretary of ... – politically hence I'm talking about the ideology, others were pushing PAC ideology, that was the difference

Facilitator: How was that resolved because COSATU was here, some wanted to join maybe some didn't want to join. What happened in the end?

Respondent: In the end, I think, and this is my opinion, that maybe others were mongering positions, there was no alternative, they had to join the winning side.

Facilitator: And within SAAWU, let's start with SAAWU, was there no male chauvinism maybe dominating these women and so on, that kind of an attitude or positions reserved for men?

Respondent: Comrade let me be honest, by then we were just working haphazardly, but the workers from the homelands did not want to be controlled by women, we were also given names etc.

Facilitator: Was it ever an issue, gender issues and so on?

Respondent: By then it wasn't an issue per se because things were going on as if there's nothing wrong

Facilitator: So there was no formation of the gender desk maybe?

Respondent: No 21:37

Facilitator: Were there prominent women within SAAWU?

Respondent: Yes, we had two women, they all passed away, ja. But honestly gender was an issue because I remember only the general secretary had a car, they would complain that funding didn't go well and so forth. It was normal for a woman to be a treasurer, that is all she did, and she will be the only one in the top 5, all she does is receive subscriptions and assist with payments, nothing more. A treasurer cannot chair a meeting except if the chair and deputy are not available, you will then be appointed to chair the meeting etc.

Facilitator: So no women never rose to the position of SG, Deputy Chairperson?

Respondent: Not known to me

Facilitator: And that was never contested, you went with the flow as women?

Respondent: Never. Generally women are PHD's (Pull Her Down) – they do not encourage each other, they are instead jealous of each other, they also do not expect a women to achieve.

Facilitator: Before joining SAAWU in 1979 did you have other alternatives, did you work somewhere, did you not want to go to university or you couldn't etc.?

Respondent: I was already married

Facilitator: So you wanted to find a job?

Respondent: Yes I was working, I enjoyed it, that's a good question because I've never asked myself, I enjoyed working in a trade union movement, I had a passion for workers and did not care that I did not earn a salary, somehow my family survived from my husband's salary. My child's education was paid for, I don't know what happened

Facilitator: You never looked back to reflect on that?

Respondent: Yes

Facilitator: Just before we deal with CAAWU. When you look back do you think SAAWU in it's initiatives?

Respondent: Yes SAAWU was the best

Facilitator: In what sense?

Respondent: It was the best because they had a love, passion for the trade union movement, they were not position mongers and did not care about money, they had a passion for the workers, its members. How can I put it .., repeat the question again

Facilitator: When you look back did it succeed in its initiatives, you said yes and I was saying in what sense did it succeed?

Respondent: It succeeded because nowadays there's a lot of good leaders who are prominent figures in the ANC and so forth

Facilitator: In terms of shop floor issues did you guys succeed?

Respondent: As I'm saying yes we did, the only problem we had was in the construction as I have indicated that when the boers introduced LDC, duration of contract, we were hit very badly with the LDC. But we fought the battle until COSATU was formed, whereby NUM supported. The employer was compelled to ensure that workers have benefits like others. We focussed on worker's benefits

Facilitator: And you succeeded?

Respondent: Yes we succeeded

Facilitator: Any failures, can you be frank maybe?

Respondent: Yes we succeeded we failed, in terms of health and safety in the construction sector, we failed dismally, we succeeded because NUM assisted us – we established a committee and attorneys were appointed to deal with the matter. We also got to learn about workers who died from asbestos and those that are terminally ill from the asbestos, we made sure that they were paid out what is due to them.

Facilitator: So no regrets that you went to SAAWU?

Respondent: No regrets, I would go back if I could

Facilitator: Construction and Allied Workers Union, how did it perform because it started with the formation of COSATU, that's what you said?

Respondent: yes, what happened is I took our failures to COSATU, things that the construction sector needed to address, it was a sector on its own and we found ways to overcome the problems in the sector.

Facilitator: Now that it had become a sector on its own now, CAWU, did you manage to ..?

Respondent: Yes we managed as I indicated that we were able to demarcate it into three, for instance civil must have its own agreements, even when we go for negotiations, building on its own etc.

Facilitator: 1990 when it came did it mean something for CAWU, the release of Mandela, unbanning of political organisations?

Respondent: SAAWU was no longer there ..

Facilitator: CAWU that's where you were?

Respondent: Yes something happened, for instance more jobs were created

Facilitator: After 1994, the level of exploitation in the construction industry, did it drop, did it become worse?

Respondent: No it was just in between, racism was an issue even today it is not completely gone, it is still there especially in the construction sector, the K-word is still being used and workers in the sector do not report such cases, they do not know their rights, exploitation is still rife

Facilitator: What about the Department of Labour, did it have some impact?

Respondent: They do if you call upon them, but in workers in the construction sector do not know their rights, they still call their employers "baas" etc., it's still there

Facilitator: Workers in the construction industry where do they come from?

Respondent: That's a good question, workers in the construction sector are mostly from rural areas, without sounding tribalistic or anything like that, they recruit each other into the industry. So the mentality is similar, they do not want to disappoint the one who got a job for them. That is the problem we have. The other one, in terms of health ..., we are losing a lot of workers in the construction sector through HIV and Aids, it's very rife. Some of them work in foreign countries and when they come back they infect their partners etc.

Facilitator: How long does it take to convince the workers to join the union, taking into consideration their backgrounds, the fact that they are not learned, they have no knowledge about unions, all they want is to work?

Respondent: Through media, we distribute flyers and visit companies to empower them

Facilitator: Do you have workers from outside the country, Mozambique, Zimbabwe etc.?

Respondent: Yes we do have, including Namibia

Facilitator: Do they tend to join the unions or do they not want to join unions?

Respondent: Sometimes leave the country as members, we follow up that they are paying their subscriptions – what the union did is, we have full time shop stewards who are given offices, they work for the company and still run union matters. The union will pay 50% for telephone calls and a computer. So whatever problems they encounter outside the border, they call us and we know what is happening

Facilitator: Nowadays do employers tend to employ people they can easily exploit like foreigners and so on?

Respondent: We have stopped that, it only happens in the mines

Facilitator: You mean the mines can't control that situation?

Respondent: They do .., but let us not mix issues because we are talking about the construction sector. The problem we have is with accommodation, if workers are transferred to work in another area, for instance Groot Marico, or .., they are given tin houses which are called F something, and you know our people are always carrying women – we constantly get such complaints. Management is sorting this out

Facilitator: Was CAWU the only union?

Respondent: Yes that was the only union .., no, no there was a fly by night union which was competing with us, BICAWU

Facilitator: Why do you call it fly by night?

Respondent: I called it that because as an ANC member I have a strong believe, they were PAC aligned

Facilitator: Is it still there?

Respondent: Yes

Facilitator: Are they still a strong rival?

Respondent: It's the only opposition

Facilitator: A strong opposition or just a mild opposition

Respondent: It's a paper bag union whereby you are left only with handles, the bottom part is not there

Facilitator: In the 1980s did you have problems with UWUSA, within the construction, some of the workers wanting to start UWUSA?

Respondent: They went and after realising that they are not going to benefit from the strike that they had, they started calling UWUSA a sweetheart of management and others withdrew

Facilitator: But also the employers in the construction industry how do they perceive unions, we are talking about big industries in the construction sector?

Respondent: Yes, Grinaker LTA, Murry and Roberts, they were in favour of BICAWU, they never liked workers to affiliate to CAWU because they knew that CAWU gave them a challenge, they also mentioned that CAWU encourages a lot of strikes. They would say BICAWU had a way of convincing its members.

Facilitator: And then in the construction sector, were salaries an issue?

Respondent: To be honest with you it was an issue before we divided ourselves into industries because they were just paying haphazardly it was an issue

Facilitator: What about strikes, did you have a lot of strikes in CAWU?

Respondent: Yes a lot

Facilitator: Involving, money issues or exploitation?

Respondent: Money issues and .., benefits in general because we even struggled to .., we never had funeral benefits, provident and pension funds, it was a luxury to the workers they started enjoying them at a later stage

Facilitator: Did you succeed?

Respondent: Yes until it was compulsory that any member joining the construction industry should have the benefit of a provident fund, we succeeded

Facilitator: What about wages?

Respondent: It's not an issue because we've already drawn a line of demarcation, workers are paid according to the positions they are holding

Facilitator: Do you have women in the construction sector?

Respondent: Yes we do have

Facilitator: What are the challenges faced by female employees in the sector?

Respondent: Most women in the construction sector are in offices and some are cleaners, those that in building are very few

Facilitator: What about benefits like maternity leave and related benefits?

Respondent: Yes we do have six months

Facilitator: Has it always been there?

Respondent: yes it's always been there

Facilitator: So there was no issue around it?

Respondent: It was an issue, we compelled them. They would tell us that they are controlled or regulated by the salaries paid out by Manpower, who is Manpower?

Facilitator: So was it resolved eventually?

Respondent: Yes it was

Facilitator: Are you still with CAWU today?

Respondent: I am with NUM since 2000

Facilitator: What were the major achievements of CAWU before you left them?

Respondent: We achieved a lot. What I did not like was the integration because it was supposed to be a merger, it turned to be an integration whereby we were swallowed

Facilitator: So CAWU was swallowed into NUM?

Respondent: They lied to us, they told us that it's going to be a merger. Jafta and myself were not in favour of that, that is why we are not in good books?

Facilitator: Why were you not in favour of the merger?

Respondent: We were in favour of the merger not the integration because obviously CAWU died and NUM remained, hence I'm saying we were swallowed.

Facilitator: So why was it difficult to pull off the integration because you were the only few descending voices against ..?

Respondent: Ja we were only few and one another thing as I indicated, we had difficulties with the discrepancy in salaries. NUM was a giant and it still is, we were not paid accordingly

Facilitator: How did the merger start between CAWU and NUM because you guys were doing your own thing, NUM were doing their own thing and now suddenly?

Respondent: To be honest with you Mr Maaba, mining is going down the drain, construction is here to stay. I think they assessed the situation that if we swallow these people NUM will remain because even now if you can look at the retrenches, people who are retrenched in the mines we're talking about thousands, instead the construction sector is growing. Look at what is happening on our national roads, the toll gates etc., who are those people, construction people.

Facilitator: Why did you buy into it because initially there was a talk of integration?

Respondent: It came after, the talk was we are going to merge, we are going to take our liabilities and whatever. Instead things changed in October

Facilitator: Did you see an advantage about the merger as CAWU?

Respondent: Actually CAWU had financial problems, we had debts, so they took advantage of that because they were financially stable. I don't know how CAWU was convinced to merge because I was not part of the talks.

Facilitator: Life at NUM, is everybody happy now?

Respondent: We are not happy, some are and some are not. For instance, one other thing that I will raise, they were talking about .., can we switch this thing off (pause)

Pause

Contd

Respondent: One other thing I do not like is, retirement age was 65, so as you know nobody can wait up to the age of 65, so we were compelled by the rules and so forth. All of a sudden they decided that they were over 60 they can go, they were given one year contract without consultation, that's a trade union, how can one be happy in a situation like that – because you are 62 or 63, you are waiting for 2/3 years. The other thing is when they were negotiating the merger, they promised to carry all our liabilities and so forth but we were forced to take our provident fund instead of them transferring it. There are many things that made us unhappy.

Facilitator: Just to go back a bit, did it affect CAWU within the merger?

Respondent: yes, a lot. We never had problems when we were still at CAWU – since we joined NUM, the labour brokers emerged.

Facilitator: Has it been successfully dealt with, firstly CAWU then NUM?

Respondent: CAWU did not have a problem with labour brokerage, now there is a problem especially in the mines – that is why we have plenty of foreigners, we are now in mining. Most of the people are from Mozambique, Lesotho and others are

brought in by the labour brokers etc. We then have a problem with workers benefits, if somebody dies – we realise that they were brought in by labour brokers.

Facilitator: Labour brokerage, did this have an effect on membership, the numbers reducing?

Respondent: It does, if you look at Aurora, do you know their history? Aurora had such problems because of the people who were employed by labour brokers, they are struggling to get access to their monies and so forth. We had a rival union which is Menwerkers

Facilitator: Is it a white union?

Respondent: Some blacks belong to it, you know how it is with us blacks, if there's petrol in the car they get in

Facilitator: So is this union a threat to NUM?

Respondent: No it's just a rival union.

Facilitator: In general when you look forward, what is the future of unions in this country, you've been there for years you probably can tell what may happen in the future?

Respondent: I would advise young people to study Labour Law, workers will always be there. Unions will always be there, they will be fighting for workers rights and

benefits. There are people who still do not understand unions, people in remote areas who are afraid to join unions because they believe unions are destructive. They believe that the employer can pay off organisers to be on their side – they come to unions when they have problems but to join some still do not understand the role of unions.

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

Respondent: I think NUM has better benefits, companies are now giving first preference to miners when selling the residential houses they live in. A lot has been done so far.

Facilitator: Any regrets when you look back, you spent a lot of time in the unions? If you had to live your life again would you do something different?

Respondent: What is left is to plough back to the community. The struggle is not over yet, if you look around Kempton Park, rates and taxes are not taken seriously and those are the things that bog us down, there needs to be a thorough assessment and people need to be educated on such issues. People buy houses in the suburbs because they are competing and when they get here they cannot afford, that is why houses are being taken over by banks, vandalised etc. So when I look back, people need to be empowered, communities need to be educated, if you look at our parks, they are delapidated they need care.

Facilitator: Any regrets or frustrations about unions?

Respondent: Frustrations we've talked about, the union I belong to frustrate me. I do not want to be pushed out although I'm old, I am 63 where will I get a job, I understand that we must move for the younger generation.

Facilitator: So the whole thing was just mis-handled?

Respondent: Yes. The other problem is our leaders, all they are after is position mongering they do not care about the workers. They forget where they come from, they forget the people who elected. In the construction and mining sector, the workers are not clean, they work hard, they need to be guided on health matters, the importance of being clean. After work they just prepare their meals and sleep, they need guidance on the type of food they should eat and wash. Health and safety needs to be taken seriously.

Facilitator: Any closing word?

Respondent: I am grateful that the history of unions is being documented. You also need to advise our people, guide and educate them.

Facilitator: Thanks for your time mama, it was worth it.

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Collection Number: A3402

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

PUBLISHER:

Publisher: Historical Papers Research Archive, University of the Witwatersrand

Location: Johannesburg

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