

Sydney Yengane

Facilitator: This is an interview with Sydney Yengane we are in East London, the date is 15 November 2010, interview is done by Brown Maaba. Tata thanks very much for your time, you can combine both English and Xhosa, feel free. Can you just give me a background about where you were born and how you were raised and how you ended in the union structures?

Respondent: I was born in the rural Transkei, a district area called Tsoma, it's a very poor background, it was a rural poor community. This is what made me to leave school earlier because I left school when I was doing standard 9, Grade 11 these days, I had to leave school because we are a big family and my parents couldn't afford to pay for my education because I had my siblings that they had to take care of.

Facilitator: When were you born exactly, which year?

Respondent: I was born in 1952. So I grew up there and then when I left then of course, as I said I left school because my parents couldn't afford to pay for me to complete my Matric. I came to King Williams Town trying to get employment which I did get. I then continued studying privately to do my Matric. I completed my Matric

Facilitator: you came to King in which year and how did you end up there, why King Williams Town of all the towns?

Respondent: I chose King Williams Town because my cousin sister was married there and was living there, then she was the only person I knew

outside of my rural environment. So I ended up staying in King Williams Town, that was in 1971. 1972 I came to East London because the husband of my cousin sister worked for Mdtantsane Municipality, she stayed here in Mdantsane so that is how I came to Mdantsane. The same year I was employed at the Frame Group Textile company. This is when I became aware of the plight of the workers, I had no knowledge before. In rural areas when we grew up there is no such thing as oppression and all that, we just grow up there, no rights, we didn't see these things, this was my first experience of oppression. There was the industry and people were treated badly, the company predominantly employed women, their management it was all white males and mostly Italians, I don't know why Italians, of course there were some Dutch guys who came from Holland, there were very few South Africans. The women were ill treated, they would just kick them if they wanted to. Then of course, it was in the same, I think in 1973, this oppression resulted into a strike which of course spread from Durban

Facilitator: Okay, the Durban strike

Respondent: yes which then influenced us really to go on strike for low wages and around 1973, that is when we started getting involved in anything that has to do with fighting the oppression as we saw it.

Facilitator: can I interrupt you there, where did you work at Xongwa?

Respondent: I worked temporarily at Good Hope Textile factory, it is just outside Zwelitsha, they had different names, that is what it was called then, I'm not sure what it is called now. It is the main employer in King Williams Town, it's a huge textile factory. I worked there for a couple of

months, but even there I couldn't ..., I worked there for three months and then I left them because I decided to concentrate more on my studies, at that time also I just could not take the that we were being treated?

Facilitator: how was it?

Respondent: it was very bad and you know the conditions, very unsafe and we were using machines, the treatment was terrible, we were treated badly and we had no rights, we were oppressed. You simply had to come to work and you had to work they want you to daily, you couldn't say I would prefer to do this today, if you are told you are working here today you have to do it, the next day you are moved elsewhere, you had no rights and could not choose what to do. For me it was worse because they saw me as a young person who simply had to take everything that I am being told to do. I left them and started a small business with my cousin, selling clothes, we collected clothes around East London and sold them to the community.

Facilitator: that was before you went to East London?

Respondent: yes that was before, it's from 1971 to the first half of 1972, I came to East London around June 1972 and found a job at The Frame Group Textile.

Facilitator: You mentioned that the working conditions were bad and you were affected by the Durban strike in 1973, just a few months after arriving at Monti. What did the workers do to ensure that the working conditions were changing or were going to change?

Respondent: We did nothing, it was simply a spontaneous strike, we were hearing about this thing on the radio, that people who are being oppressed have on strike, we had no unions, you dare not have unions in those days. It was so spontaneous because the strike was simply decided on the spur of the moment, people were being paid very little. One woman was paid, she just threw her wages and slip back to the personnel officer. The strike then started, 6000 workers went on strike, the strike was not planned. There were some people who quietly agitated the strike, for example people like, Nogushi who is from exile, he used to work for the Frame Group Textile. He was amongst the people who worked there, they were very quiet underground. They influenced this somehow, we just went on strike and neither of them would tell us that they were working for a liberation movement, they just pretended to be with us. It was clear that they got influenced elsewhere. So we went on strike and the strike was for low wages. We won the strike because we were given some money, we got an increase.

Facilitator: How did you negotiate, did you have to appoint some committee to negotiate for you?

Respondent: No committee, nothing, we just said we want more money and management just because they were under pressure, they were worried, I think they were worried about the economic boom. They were exporting blankets therefore they couldn't afford a long strike that is why they succumbed. Perhaps there was also political pressure in Monti that they must not prolong this because it can spread.

Facilitator: The involvement of the state, the police what happened?

Respondent: at that point in time they did not come forward, they stayed away.

Facilitator: any lessons that can be drawn from that strike?

Respondent: First thing, we were .. (a bit hesitant), okay there was that strike, then there was the bigger strike, you know there was two strikes, a mini strike, and then the big strike. I think the big strike is the one we really won. Let me correct myself, there were two of them, there was a strike first, it was quickly resolved, got an increase and everything quite. Then the next one which was really the one that was being influenced by the Durban strike. The Durban strike was the talk of town, radios and all that and then again that was also started by women who came to work and made a lot of noise. We don't know how they started this thing. They came to work late, I was at work I remember very well, got into the factory, the next thing we saw everybody coming back, we also joined the strike. I was at the personnel office at that point in time. So we joined the strike and that strike we really lost, we thought because we had just had a small strike before and we won. This time we lost out.

Facilitator: what were your grievances this time around?

Respondent: It was the same thing because we still said listen there's not enough, this is not what you can give us. They had just given us, I'm not sure it was 50 cents increase, but we said no ..., and where it came from I cannot remember, we never sat down and planned. Everybody just complained and said look at this and that, we complained, we make so many blankets, we do this and that, the company is making huge profits and we are getting nothing and also generally we are under the

supervision of white people. The whites don't treat us with decency, we are called monkeys, we are being even physically assaulted, all those things were happening because that's how people were treated those days, if you do anything wrong they would just clap you. I think we made a mistake because we had no plans, no committees. The company had built a huge store, the building is still there, huge, high with red bricks, it is still there. Most government offices are situated there, they are renting, some of the buildings were converted to government offices, SARS, SASA, but when the building was built it was a store. This was before the second strike. What we didn't realise at the time was that there was a great plan, they already knew that things were about to change, they built the store, we worked overtime and we were making money and we were earning, you would work until you felt exhausted. When we went on strike, what they had done, instead of simply exporting they were also building reserves, the store was full of blankets. We went on strike hoping that we had succeeded like before with the mini strike, we thought the next strike would be like the walk in the park. The managing director at the time, Sydney Frey, he said came and addressed us, "forget, I will sell my blankets for six months, you will go there, go and starve and you will come back crawling", that is how he addressed. Three weeks down the line, we didn't have any clue, we would come, go home, come the next day nothing happens, that is all we did, no meetings. After three weeks people started feeling the brunt, because there was a lot of women as I mentioned, most of them older women with responsibilities of their children. They started saying we are feeling the pain, 6000 people employed by one employer with no salary for three weeks. The whole thing started to crumble. We started doubting whether we did the right thing or not. What they did then, we kept on coming to the factory and just talk amongst ourselves. The whole executive team came and asked

us what we wanted, we wanted our jobs back. Then the whole thing started, we were weak because we were not organised, no union and no money. Then we started, selective re-employment, because all those people had to come forward, supervisors, they chose the people they wanted back. In those days we were carrying our dompas and were re-employed. Some supervisors used their power to chase people away, they would call you and then say no not this one. So we took the pain, it was painful for us, the selection process they used was terrible, it was the worst form of abuse especially for women, men they were about 20%, some women if they are ugly they wouldn't get their jobs back. Some would be called back and then chased away again. We were broken.

Facilitator: so in the end how many people were re-employed?

Respondent: I'm not sure but I would say perhaps 80% was brought back, all those that were seen as ring leaders were chucked out

Facilitator: you also mentioned that the factory was dominated by women. What about maternity leave and things like that?

Respondent: there was nothing like that if you went on maternity leave you had to resign for six months and then come back.

Facilitator: and start from scratch?

Respondent: ja

Facilitator: and issues around overtime, nightshifts and so on?

Respondent: they decided how much to pay for overtime, I don't even know how much, there were no clear policies regarding overtime pay, we were just interested in the extra money and wouldn't ask any questions

Facilitator: for how long were you part of this factory?

Respondent: 1972 to 1974

Facilitator: you left or were you chucked out eventually, what happened?

Respondent: I resigned, at the time I was working in the HR office as a administrator/clerk, but the manager Wally Koetzee started now sort of abusing me about my background, because of how I got the job. You remember in those days I had no permit to live in East London, the pass laws, Section 10, I had no right to work there because I was from rural areas, in particular Transkei. He questioned how I got the job, it was through him, like taking the contract to the mines in the olden days, what they would do now .., he took me, he went to the Native Affairs which is now Home Affairs, or Dept of Labour. He went there to tell them that he wants to employ me because this guy has Matric but also it was a struggle, the guys who were there, in Mdantsane, all black, I was chased away (very difficult to follow), I was chased away they said you think we don't have people around here. I still know the guy who said this to me. He is still around, when I see him, he doesn't remember. I feel sorry for him. He literally, when this white man came with me and asked that I be registered he is from Transkei. He said no what does he want here, in front of the white guy. I said sorry I'm just hungry I'm looking for a job. He was angry with me. And then he told this white guy I am going to look for a

local person, if I don't find a local person he must come here and I will sort him. But when we left I was told by the other guys that when you come back on Thursday he is just going to take your reference book, he is going to deport you. They told me that I should just go back. I said okay if he does that I will throw the reference book away and go apply for a new one. At the end of the day I had to go back to him, I went there privately I had to beg like a fox, I told him how I lost my family. He felt sorry for me and sorted me out on Thursday. That is how I got the job.

What made me to resign (the phone rang) – as I was saying, he took my reference book and wrote with a pen, on a page there, “allowed to remain in the magisterial district of Mdantsane whilst employed by the Frame Group”. Which means if I lose my job or resigned I had to go back, that is how it is written, even today I kept it. But now he knew that I will never leave Frame Group because I was at his mercy, he had got me the job. In those days if you were from the rural areas it was like you are cursed, amongst ourselves black people. You come from rural areas, Transkei, people would laugh at you. Whenever we had a disagreement he would say to me you forget that I got you a job, you will never work anywhere else, you came here, you were like a sick fowl, now you are jumping around because I got you a job. Then I said okay, that is how I left. I went and looked for a job, around here, not here at Mercedes Benz, it was just across the road, another company. So I resigned from there.

Facilitator: but when you left the job were there unions at the time?

Respondent: No we didn't have unions

Facilitator: The Mdantsane bus boycott how did it affect this particular industry, it was in 1973 I think?

Respondent: I'm trying to think, ja, it really did affect because you know, everything almost came to a stand still because buses were the only means of transport allowed. The bus company was established and it was the only one, it had monopoly, it was government controlled, no one else, there were very few taxis at the time. I just cant remember the time now.

Facilitator: and the conditions with the new employer, after 1974?

Respondent: I think I was just there for three months in this other company, it was much better, Chloride Batteries, they were manufacturing batteries. The conditions were much better, double the amount I was earning per week. I stayed there for three months because I could not work 9 hours night shift, for the first time in my life I couldn't take it, it was too much. Also there were unions or anything but now what I did, remember very well exactly these things that we normally see people doing sometimes, not coming to work for no reason, no sick certificate. This is what I used to do because I wanted them to dismiss so that I can have a reason to tell my family or friends, so that I can say I left because I was dismissed. I would sit at home and not bring a doctors certificate, after two days come late at work, and not ask anybody. People would call me and say "what are you doing, you don't want the job, you are going to be dismissed", especially the elders they would scold at me. The supervisor couldn't speak to me, he just looked at me because that is what I wanted them to do. The manager of the department, a white guy, I can't remember his name. He would just call me to his office and ask me "why did you not come to work"? I would say I was sick, he would say

“why did you not go to the doctor”, I would say I didn’t have money. He would look at me and say “don’t do this again”, he would send me back to work. This thing didn’t work. I would sometimes work two/three days a week, it didn’t work until of course then now, Mercedes Benz advertised jobs, that was 1975, and then I applied for the jobs, they were pilot projects, we only realised after we joined. They were advertising jobs that were previously reserved for whites, they started advertising to employ black people. So I was amongst the first group that was employed as pilot, to see whether black people can really do this job

Facilitator: can they think?

Respondent: ja

Facilitator: What kind of a job was that, some quality inspection, we were quality inspectors, receiving clerks, receiving stocks, the logistics of the day. That is where we were working. We were a group of 14 blacks at that time. It was not easy to get the job. When I came with the group, I was amongst the few people that were not employed immediately, I was called, interviewed and told okay fine, go and wait, other people were employed. There was about five of us who were told to go and wait. We waited two/three weeks. Then I had to play a trick again. I came there, remember in order for me to also get the permit to work and seek job I had to go and buy it from the guys who worked the government offices in those days. You had to buy, they would register you as if you live in the hostels in Mdatsane. Register you there, you have been staying in a hostel for so long and then now they register you and then you get a permit from the Department of Labour and then you can seek jobs around East London. That is how I came to seek the job. So that is what I used, and

then as I'm saying, then I came here, I had now to .., also there, the manager was a white person, who was more liberal. A young liberal who came from Rhodes University. Under him we were two black personnel/senior guys. So when I came the second time, I realised, people told me ..(unclear) you not going to get a job. So I had to tell the security guard that I have been called in. People were not allowed in. They would ask if they can call anybody, I showed them a telegram which was three months old. They couldn't read. I was allowed in, when I was in, because I wanted to speak to the manager. I had to find a way to go beyond these two in order to reach his office. They were all in the same block, how do I get to his office. So when I got there there were some people sitting, employed for the same job, part of the group of 14. I was not being called. I got in and sat amongst the people that were there, who had just finished doing tests. One of these guys noticed me because they knew that I had done the test before, they said why are you sitting there, what is your story, what do you want, how did you come in. I said I was called by ..., I don't even know his name, just showed them the office, I said I had forgotten his name. I think he himself got confused, he stood up and said .., as he was coming I approached him and when we were alone in his office. I simply told him, I'm here to see you, I don't have a job, I'm hungry, I can't even help my brother to go to school, we are the only two, we are orphans, which is what I told him. This was not true. I told him I had not eaten for the day, I asked him to borrow me money to buy food and then when you employ me I will pay you back. He started phoning around looking for a space I think they had already committed some people for these jobs. That is how he found that there's going to be additional two vacancies, they originally wanted 14. After phoning the various departments, he said to me, go home, I've got everything I promise you and I'm going to answer you. Then he gave me, it was a lot

of money, R1 note. I left, after two days I received a telegram telling me, that is how I got the job. I was now employed with the group of 14. They kept on reminding us that we are a pilot group and that we are employed to set the pace for others also to be employed, if you behave the Germans will allow for more people to be employed, that is what we were being told.

There also, eyes were beginning to open. When we came there was what was called a liaison committee, people representing you, you don't know them, they come and tell you that you going to get an increase, whites are going to get 10 cents increase, coloureds are going to get 7 cents increase, we are going to get 5 cents increase, we wanted to know why. We were told we don't have a union coloured and white people have a union, we have a liaison committee. Then we started saying why are you guys agreeing, we never voted for you, they would just come and say so and so will be your liaison committee members, selected by management and then they would call them to these meetings. Then the guys started saying we can't talk there, they just tell us, because what they used to do they would call, Africans were in the majority, call them as the liaison committee and say to them, listen we don't have money this is what we are going to give you, so much increase, if they say for example 5 cents an hour for black people. When they come from the meeting they will come and tell us and then they call coloureds and tell them what they are getting, the same with whites (phone rang)

Facilitator: you were talking about issues of the liaison committee etc.?

Respondent: yes, what they did now, when they called the coloureds, when they start to try and negotiate with them, remember you are in the

minority even though you have a union, the majority of the people have accepted 5 cents, do you want us to give you 5 cents as well. Now and then they would say we can't get an increase here, too little money because you guys have already accepted and you are in the majority. We would be angry why are they getting more than us, they are also upset with us because we have already accepted. The liaison committee couldn't do anything about it, they were just told. So that is what really now started us now to say this liaison committee ..., we started talking how can we come together. That is how the union was born.

Facilitator: which year was that?

Respondent: 1978

Facilitator: the name of the union?

Respondent: a parallel union, Africans had no right to belong to unions still, so we had a union really that was .., by name, it was just a subsidiary of the coloured union which was called National Union of Metal Allied Rubber Workers of South Africa, something like that. That is how they .., but now, in order now to keep their registration because they were a registered also for them to be legitimate, legally, then a union, parallel union, UAW was formed, the same guy, the same office everything organised. But we said for Africans we going to be this union. At the same time, things were happening, remember the 1976 riots, the riots at school, everywhere people were agitating and at the same time the Vian Commission which was set up by black people, how they can be appeased with, what can they come up with in terms of appeasing the black employees. So whilst we were doing all these things, government

was also doing something in order to race against the problem that was confronting them. I mean after Steve Biko, there was now a union also that had just come from, which was born out of University of Fort Hare, SAWU (South African Allied Workers Union), now there was this one which was registered, less militant or political, it was more conservative. And then those things happened together, the Vlan Commission came with those recommendations that blacks should be allowed to belong to unions, should be registered as employees, and should be defined legally. Legally black people were not defined as employees, anything could be done to you, you couldn't go to a court of law, or labour court, in those days it was called Industrial Court. We were defined as employees.

So now they started saying include them, let them have their own unions, pension and other work benefits. The first three years when I worked here I could not belong to a pension fund, from 1975, we were only allowed from 1978, unemployment fund etc.

Facilitator: why were you regarded as not employees?

Respondent: It was part of the apartheid and discrimination, I'm sure it was a way of reserving the benefits for the whites

Facilitator: what happened in 1978 that changed things?

Respondent: The change happened, as I am saying appointed this commission, the commission came with the recommendations for blacks to belong to trade unions, they must also be recognised as employees at work, defined as such legally, and also to get other benefits like others, the whites and the coloureds. Now there was that opening. We started

coming up with the unions. This was short lived because in 1980 this was just merged to form (I think he was showing you something) to form what is now called MAWU. I think we came together as one union.

At the same time there were also other employees who became members of SAWU, that is how then of course we started belonging to unions. It was not only in this industry, I mean in other industries as well, textile, being organised, and then FOSATU came about, I can't remember the year now, when it was formed

Facilitator: 1978

Respondent: 1978, after the formation of FOSATU, we then now also ..., maybe my dates, I may not be 100% accurate. All these things happened simultaneously. I think I remember FOSATU Congress was held in 1979 in April if I'm not mistaken. At the same time we became one union, I don't now which one started first. We carried on with further developments of COSATU being formed

Facilitator: achievements now in the workplace?

Respondent: that was the turning point because I think to some extent, MAWU came in, first thing it was an organised structure, we had a union office running union affairs, recognised shop stewards at work, the employees now have legitimate to be represented, the employer couldn't just dismiss employees as they wished. MAWU became very strong by training shop steward. Shop stewards were not appointed because they were militant or outspoken, we were trained thoroughly, how you represent a person, where you start, investigations, cross

examinations, all those little things that were perceived to be minor. That is where we were different. They would say to us irrespective of where we are working, we are still politically oppressed. We were taught to create a firm ground, we had to ensure that we are protected and that nobody is threatened at work, you will then be able to spread out there. So you see it was same end but cross purposes.

We carried on, that was one benefit, shop stewards were given proper training, they started threatening management. Management was predominantly white Afrikaners with no education who were supervisors, they now couldn't stand and argue with us in labour cases with us. They would end up saying I don't want to do this, I don't want to dismiss people, I am told by the personnel department, Mr so and so told me to do this, we are being told what to do in this place. They now feared shop stewards, not for militance, but because they just couldn't argue. We knew exactly what to do, we would be well prepared, you are advised properly. We were given the background of trade unionism. For instance it was not just training, first thing I remember it was two full weeks training on how to represent people and how to negotiate. We were taken out of work to go for training.

The next thing, during school vacation, Wits University was one of the those universities, liberal university, we used to stay there around September, we would go to Wits and be trained by the academic staff, historians, I remember some of them Eddie Webster and the other Webster who was killed, the other one was Prof. Phil Bona, and then of course the retired minister of Alec Irwin, because at the time he was lecturing at the University of Natal, Haltin Chido. There were quite a number of these academics.

We were now taught the history of the union, we started understanding what the union is all about, that it is quite a broad movements. So those were some of the benefits.

Facilitator: the recruitment of people to join unions, was it difficult?

Respondent: It was not difficult, we were just talking about the experience of people, things that they experienced, the only thing was fear, initially what we used to do now would be to organise people. Get the guy in the toilet, let him sign a form. People that didn't want to be exposed you would just keep quiet about their membership.

Facilitator: the burning issues that needed to be addressed in this workplace what were they?

Respondent: Burning things it was two things, the low wages and the conditions of employment, how the people were treated. A manager would dismiss you if they didn't like your face, simple. There was one white person here at paint shop, people used to start at 6 in the morning, he would come in the morning and call the team to address them before they start working, he comes in angry, "Jesus, I feel like dismissing somebody", if he meets your eyes you are gone. He would call you to his office, there was a normal book requisition, just fill in your name, reason for dismissal "cheeky" and then he would tell you to go. He says go to highway which was a bus rank, meaning you must go and sit there with those that were unemployed. If his wife gave him hell at home he has to distress by dismissing somebody, people would just lose jobs, injuries at work not reported. They would say "what are you going to do about it".

Also discrimination in applying the discipline, people would be assaulted by whites and nothing happens, any black person who does that is dismissed immediately. That was the type of discrimination.

Facilitator: but did you fight successfully such things?

Respondent: yes we did successfully, it was difficult but we succeeded.

Facilitator: In terms of low wages, how far did you go?

Respondent: I think even there we started moving, slowly behind, I think Volkswagen at one stage became the leading company in this industry, with good wages and then but until then, in 1987, then it was NUMSA. That was the biggest strike because in 1987 we had a huge union, NUMSA. NUMSA was born out of the merger of these two. There were some elements who simply refused to accept the merger, then they remained under this name which was supposed to have gone

Facilitator: any particular reason?

Respondent: because they felt that the direction that it is moving is the direction that has been pulled by this, which was at that point in time competing. For example, amongst the things, SAWU is a general union was very much opposed to a registered union, you can't be registered with government, because they are going to control you, you can't have stop order facilities at work because they .., there was a lot of suspicions because of things that happened in the past. We carried on. So these things that have been happening, they simply now were being extended

to everybody, now these guys said no. The new thing was also this collective bargaining, where all the 7 motor manufacturing companies came together to form central negotiations, which they were opposed to, they wanted to remain as Mercedes Benz. Of course they remained a small group, and of course amongst managers, management supported the break away group which was now creating the tension stop the impact to come into them.

In 1987 it was the turning point because there was the biggest wage strike which became the most successful in the industry, 9 week wage strike by Mercedes Benz employees and we succeeded. I think we got something like 75% increase, this was never heard of. The minimum wage was R2 an hour increased to R3.50 which is something like 75% if I am not mistaken

Facilitator: but they barged without complaining, the management?

Respondent: No it was the biggest struggle, management stood firm, you can imagine 9 weeks without pay, we were now divided, some were saying lets go back. This is what united us because we said let's forget about all this, we are all here for the common purpose to earn more money and these guys then supported me, supported each and then that is how we came together. This was minimised, left a few others, of course some of them remained out there some of them

Facilitator: were you affiliated under FOSATU before COSATU?

Respondent: Yes, because now I was part of the formation of FOSATU

Facilitator: and the debates within unions about we needed black only unions we don't whites and so on, what was the position now?

Respondent: I think in those days although we were using non-racial but really I can't remember whites joining, but it was coloureds and Africans, and then of course Indians Zulu speaking in Natal, as well as Transvaal and then Western Cape you had coloureds predominantly because they are the people that worked there. There were some few whites who also joined us, especially those that were perhaps more intellectual, there were few whites amongst us. So the question now, at that point time already it we had to make sure that, even amongst shop stewards we had the coloureds. The coloured people didn't like the militant approach but we had to pull some of them in.

Facilitator: the whole thing of equal wages when was it eventually addressed within Mercedes?

Respondent: The equal wages, it was addressed, the agitation started immediately after the unions are formed because prior to the formation of the union, there were differences, you had coloureds and you had ourselves. After the formation now of trade unions, then we started ..., although we belonged to the same union we were still not earning the same. They were saying what about the whites. That is when the argument started about equal wages for equal work.

Facilitator: Any positive impact when COSATU was formed after 1987 how did that ..(unclear) to the unions?

Respondent: I think the formation of COSATU, firstly they talked about the unity, in our case it was the unit amongst these two. Although the spread right across the industry in South Africa because all small unions were brought together in order to form one. For example in the food industry you had FAWU which was Food and Allied Workers Union, we had the other one, the catering industry, Pick n Pay and all that, they all came together to form a strong union. So it was .., that's how COSATU was established and also of course to influence further now, they started influencing the government. The government was beginning to worry because it was a big force now.

Facilitator: After 1990 when Mandela was released, the un-banning of the ANC, did that impact on the unions and the workplace and the concern about the future South Africa. It did cause, the first thing with us, you may find this in our archives. With us here, after the release of Mandela, I remember very well that there was a meeting that was called by the employees, a general meeting (phone rang). Everybody came together. Including staff, because remember the salaried staff generally didn't belong to a union because they are not part of a bargaining unit, so the unions don't represent them. So people who wanted to belong to the union could do so but if you are at the bargaining unit, where the union operates, whereby if you are not a member you are still bound to pay the same fees as union members. It was called the bargaining fee because all the benefits that you got were negotiated by unions, you also benefited even if you are not a member. If you are a staff member it does not apply to you. In this case, staff includes supervisors who are normally in conflict with employees on the shop floor are part of the staff that all came together, big meeting, then there was a proposal, it was a celebration, Mandela is out etc. The proposal came from one guy who is

from Pretoria, Philip Grum maybe you can go and speak to him, he works at Pretoria Mercedes Benz. He stood up and made the proposal, we all wanted to be seen to be supporting democracy, we asked Mercedes Benz to build a car for Mandela. Management surprisingly they accepted with both hands. This was an opportunity for them to play a meaningful role. So the car was built. It is at the museum now

Facilitator: I remember that, bullet proof car

Respondent: yes, that first red car. So that was the significance. Now what happens, management I think they were more progressive guys at that time because they saw this opportunity, then they organised everybody including managers, there was an agreement for everybody to contribute. We had to contribute our free time, the company didn't pay us, it was one hour per day, management was going to contribute all the material. The company agreed. We contributed our labour they contributed material to build this car. That was one of the positives and this was seen as one of the very good things.

Also amongst the people, including staff, united people more towards accepting each other, some very right wing guys, a few of them. They stood up in a meeting, when management called a staff general meeting including managers, they were all alone, excluding the workers, to motivate people to agree to work the free hours. Some few guys stood up and said they will never build a car for terrorist, they stood up. Others accepted, they were motivated. So everybody really, whether they are DA today but everybody built this car for him, knowing very well he is ANC. And also, you see the sensitivity was also around .., the Mercedes market was predominantly rich whites, predominantly farmers who bought

trucks and all that. How do you build a car for a terrorist who come from jail and expect to retain the market. They had to find a way around that, they said we are not supporting the ANC, we are only supporting Mandela's principles, democracy and freedom for all. That was Mercedes Benz, they believed in his principles. The car is not given to the ANC, but the individual who encourages democracy.

The farmers called the company, they were very unhappy, the right wing guys, they eventually had to accept that.

Facilitator: Issues of racism how tough was it?

Respondent: It was tough, even now there are still some elements of racism, of course now it is subtle. When you have to employ people in open positions, who do you employ, it is quite difficult. Racism is really the biggest problem.

Facilitator: How did the union deal with those issues, separate toilets, separate canteens etc?

Respondent: those things fell away. As soon as we started having unions, I think it was easier for, maybe in our case it was much easier because our organisation was a multinational company, Germans did not support apartheid per se, there was pressure on them. To get recognition for the unions here, whilst they were delaying, trying to resist, they just sent a delegation to Germany and Germany came and put pressure that you must accept trade unionism because we are an international company that cannot have its image tarnished because of their dealings. The company also bought, at some stage the South African government,

through the Volkskas Bank in those, today it is Absa, they had the majority share in Mercedes Benz, as such you had key positions which were filled by somebody from the Afrikaner Broederbond who was the personnel manager, they had to keep tabs on us. They were here now not only to do the work but also to spy for the government. When the Germans bought their majority shares back, things started changing. Germans came back to positions and the changes in terms of labour laws, they allowed black people in senior positions. We also had, I left out in 1989, there was a .., at the time that the apartheid laws were very stringent, for example the security laws in the country where people would be detained without trial etc., people would be killed in jail, it was at that time. Then we agreed as the union, went to Germany, the Germans agreed to support us (interruption somebody greeting) – they agreed in Germany, the trade unions in Germany, Egamettal for example. They agreed that we must contract out of the oppressive South African laws, we agreed that any employees of Mercedes Benz, individuals who belonged to political parties, a lot of people were in both ANC and PAC. People had established that they are protected by the union at work, out there we can do what we like in terms of belonging to the political parties, nobody was going to lose their jobs. We agreed on 14 minimum standards. This was an agreement between the Germans, the trade unions, South African trade union NUMSA and South African Mercedes Benz as well as Mercedes Benz International. The agreements were signed with the trade unions that nobody detained under the South African illegitimate laws will lose their jobs, their wages and salaries were secured. If you were detained for political reasons you will be paid until you are released. Some people were detained for up to three years and their families were receiving their salaries, their jobs were secured. The company did not support the apartheid laws, we signed the declaration.

Facilitator: How long did you remain in the union structures, are you still part of it?

Respondent: Now, I am no longer because my position now, I am in industrial relations. Around 1990/91, not sure, I joined management, I was amongst the first few blacks that joined management. What happened was, there was a change, some of the conflict because of the small ..(unclear) which the majority of people thought .., management was very much supportive of these people although they were few. They were trying to build this so that they have a big block that is going to oppose this very strong union which was a threat to them. We were agitating how can you be a manager if you don't understand black people, how are you going to manage them, it was becoming strong. The guys were generally not educated, they encouraged us to bring our families who were looking for jobs – they had access in everything. Then in 1989, for almost sympathy strike, there was two other companies, I forget the names, Slumko and Nondwang ..(unclear) Cromberg and Shubert, he was a shop steward there, there was also SA TV, another company, they went on strike, Slumko Nongwang was dismissed where he worked as a shop steward for attending a meeting, management didn't want him to go, then there was a strike, the strike led to his dismissal. We said okay, in order to support them, we not going to touch harnesses that are coming from your company, forget it. This meant this was almost like a strike because the only company that was doing the harness of the car it effectively meant there is no production. The guys did not want to join them, then production would want to do the job, the whole thing now started. People were saying we not going to ..(unclear) and these guys wanted to work, then one morning people just walked out, got all these

guys, everywhere they were working, let's take everybody out and all a meeting to discuss this thing in a meeting because we going to fight. People resisted, they were at work, this group comes and say let's go to a meeting during working hours, they refused. Then the fighting started, it ended up with physical confrontation that was (interruption) – the physical confrontation, people ended up in hospital, as we were moving around, telling people to come and join, there was one area where they were in the majority, they were armed literally. The guys were armed, they stabbed people, used all sorts of things on the floors, it was almost like a military style confrontation because they had .., you know white people had taken the nuts and bolts threw them on the floor and when people were walking there they were just slipping and these guys were attacking with sharp objects, others ended up in hospitals and all that. That was 1989 before the release of Mandela.

What I am coming to now, as a result of the agreement, the Germans now recalled the CEO who was here, Seth van Hoolen, he was the chairman of the company. They felt that he is the one who has embarrassed the company, workers were fighting with the support of .., the police were outside the gates waiting there, guys that had been attacking people, when they came out they were just escorted by the police, the police couldn't do anything to them meanwhile our people were hospitals. Anybody from here, even the supervisors who helped .., I remember one them took some of the guys to hospital with his car and when he came back he was suspended, he was saved by the people.

So the Germans in their response after investigating, they recalled the CEO. They brought new management, people like Christoof Kokel, he was employed as the new CEO, he came in with consultants, Judge Siphon

Ngwenya, others from Johannesburg, Stacks Masango, Ian Russel, they were all labour lawyers. Christof brought Russel, Russel in turn brought another labour lawyer and Afrikaner guy, Louis Vermaak and these two other guys, Jerome Ngwenya and Stacks Masanga. They formed a huge team here to change this, there was conflict between management and workers, it was so bad at that point in time. It had gone backwards, in other words despite all the changes. So when they came in they came with all the changes. The first thing was to go to the drawing board, then came the 14 minimum standards they were the group that also negotiated, it was agreed, we then started having workshops together in management and unions, set common objectives for the company, came out with a vision. It was the first time the company had a vision that was supportive of workers, and also new benefits were added on. The Affirmative Action policy was established, blacks were promoted to management positions, at the time there was a lot of ill discipline, people were stealing, drinking at work, nobody could touch them. The union was too strong for these guys. And on the other side, some of the managers also were in the army and government intelligence, they were also doing their funny things, sacrificing people, people were being detained etc.

The first thing was to look into all the cases that we had against each other, put them down, decide what to do with these people. The first time we reconciled, this happened in 1989. We sat down with the managers, some were dismissal cases. A number of our people could have been dismissed if we went through the inquiry, we reached a compromise, they had done something and so had they. So we cleared the slate and started afresh. So it was agreed. So that is how some people secured their jobs. This was after this group had joined the company and they worked very hard to try and pull, firstly we had to pull

the right wing thinking management, who were pro-national party and right wing, and on the other side we were very militant, anti-white because this had created conflict in the organisation. We were pulled together.

They started a project called Township Tours, all managers were forced to have one tour to visit the townships, a day off work with his wife/partner and tour the townships, go to Duncan village to see those shacks, to see what is happening. It made a lot of difference, when they come back we would sit down and talk about it. When they were going for the tours it was a mixture of people, Germans, Afrikaners, English and some blacks. They would start arguing, fighting, some of them led the company ..(unclear) school. The very Afrikaners who were anti this thing, when they went to a township called Cambridge township, when they came back they were swearing because there was one Italian fellow, he was a manager and a counsellor, I forgot his name. They came back, they wanted to beat him at work, you built a tarred road in your house, people are living in shacks, in the township there were no toilets, we had to walk with these guys, there was a small room that was being used as a school. They came back and said we can't have .., how can you have people living in such conditions? The bucket systems, these things were stinking, we took them the places.

The organisation started some support system by donating books, clothing, collected them etc. The company was then forced to fix the school, the school had been burned down in 1985, then Christof came, at the time I was in management, I was asked, I worked with Siphon Ngwenya, they employed me as one of the advisors. We went to look for a temporary structure. We found a 3 room classroom structure. After two

years the school went to build a school, this was in all the papers. The government built a school after that. Really that impacted on the lives of the people out there.

Facilitator: any regrets for being part of the unions, was it worth it?

Respondent: it was worth it, I tell you even now if there was a way with me, that would be .., I believe that is the best philosophy to teach people, to understand trade unionism and how people felt, and feel and how they do things. Trade unions is the best school of teaching people how to understand and absorb pressure and also understand and be able to be flexible. There is nothing people can talk about that they don't understand, they do things wrong, I understand the reason why because these are some of the things that we used to do, it's the best form of schooling now. By the way some of the most successful team managers, even here, in this organisation are ex-trade unionists. Mlama Jordan who is in Paint shop, Christopher Nxandu at logistics as a manager, Vernon Marelia, Daniel Sebang, Andile also, and of course myself, I can't remember them all. Where those guys work now, they run huge sections in their presence. He will sit in his office, people are struggling and fighting and swearing, they go and be booked off with stress. These guys run big areas ..(unclear), how can you do that. The people do the work and only thing he supports them, they get what they want. That is the problem with managers generally who don't understand, somebody will come and say listen I didn't get my money look at this, I don't know what happened there, they would just go to personnel, meanwhile he is expecting him to assist him. The poor guy would go and solve it ..(unclear), people will do anything because they feel that they are being cared for. People who haven't had that background do not understand do not understand I

don't know why, that was my experience, I don't know if it is the same in other places but you just don't understand, I don't know whether it is arrogance or a feeling of perhaps I am superior. It means nothing. These guys, the one who just called me now, he came here, he has a private family problem with his car, this has got nothing to do with me, he wants to know how this guy who took his money, he can't get his car back, he needs R3000 – now I must go out of my way and try and get him a solution, he was giving me feedback now. I advised him go to the ..(unclear) they must expose him. He says no ..(unclear) the guy is running away.

Look at this example, we have a huge list of people who are indebted, who are not earning good money in this company, they are going home with R20, we can't just leave it. but you can say you did it yourself, what must I do about that. These guys, they have families, we must find ways of trying to resolve, find ways of these issues that must people must at least, their social lives, organise them he will then concentrate at work. What they do he just comes and resigns, he had been working for 20 years, drinking all of a sudden, his family is broken, he goes away, you meet him here, he is one of the alcoholics, you can't have that, but we understand. People that have not been just say well you see this is how they are, they stay in the shacks, they don't want to get out, they must stand up and work for themselves. It's not a simple thing like that. I am supporting what you were asking whether it was a good .., it is still a good thing.

Facilitator: any mistakes that were done by the union in the past which you think you should approached things differently rather than this strategy?

Respondent: most of the time I think things were relevant at that point in time, but I think some of the things is to move away from the kind of training that was started because I think really ended with our groups, some few groups behind, us, I think that's where the unions have really fallen back, but previously .., I'm trying to think what could we have done better in our days, perhaps it was also the .., well sometimes we were less tolerant, which was also influenced by the environment of course. What was happening out there, after 1985, necklacing because people couldn't tolerate what was going on, if you were a sell out and then these things applied at work as well, because people wanted to apply them here. Maybe it's just because there was no other way at that point in time, in order to be vigilant you had to do those things, force people to behaving in a particular way that we wanted in order to succeed in our struggle.

Generally speaking I think that the worst thing was education, if the unions had thought of perhaps a group, invest in people, pay for formal education at universities. Formal education should have been considered, if we had gone that route we could have had amongst fine leaders, who understand, who are capable now, who are intellectually capable as well as academically qualified. Sometimes this is a problem, a person would understand something and lacks on the other side, and he is a leader. It is good to have people for example to have eloquent speakers who can agitate, but now if he has to put it in action he is not there, somebody else must do the job. This is where we re lacking. Amongst .., when one looks now, we were just talking with NUMSA not so long ago, we had a workshop. We called the whole national executive, general secretary Jim and this young fellow, Mashilo. He is amongst brilliant persons and is highly respected. The managers here for the first

time they comment, if you go to a meeting if Mashilo is going to sit across the table, he does not fight, he is very constructive, he comes with facts that are researched that if you don't do your own research he might even fool you. That guy gave us, we ran for our money, we really worked hard. I am saying that now is because he was taken from the shop floor, he was trained at the factory, then the union identified him as one of the young chaps who had potential in the future to lead the organisation. They paid for his full time studies at university, he is paying back the money in a big way. Shop stewards do not research, they don't do anything, they just go, the only thing is these benefits guys, they just want to, everything is easy because management themselves understand better. So maybe these are some of the weaknesses that caused them not do anything. But this young chap now, I mean we called a workshop which we now had to look at each other in the eyes and say you are useless, talking unions across this and this, you are letting the people down, we know this, we are management on the other side, they also come and say you this, management is this and this, people are not happy, you oppressing people on this, but the only thing to us with them is always that look they seem not to be intellectually prepared to sit across the table with management. In the past it was like ..., you know. Mashilo picks it up and ... For example in the past we have an agreement where a company was prepared to invest in two shop stewards, to be trained into operations management, and also on ..., technical (interruption) he really is, he can pick it up, we agreed to train shop stewards, maybe training at the same time with management, in order to understand the dynamics of the economy, what is going on because things are getting tougher and tougher, companies are even employing people who are not full time, why and how, how can they fight, how do you go about it instead of howling and not do anything. So I'm saying this young Mashilo is dynamic

in so much that I even told the general secretary that you going to lose this chap.

Facilitator: Thanks very much for your time

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.