

Esther Ncenene

Facilitator: This is an interview with Mama Ester Ncenene, we are in Potchefstroom, the date is 25 January 2012, interview is done by Brown Maaba. Ausi, thanks for your time. Please give me a background as to where you were born, your schooling and how you were raised and how you ended up where you are today?

Respondent: Okay, I went to school at Potchefstroom, Grade 11 at school, then ..(unclear) I started working at Friendly Grocery

Facilitator: so school you went until Grade 11?

Respondent: yes

Facilitator: when was this?

Respondent: 1985

Facilitator: why did you leave school and look for a job

Respondent: I got married in 2000, I married at ..(unclear)

Facilitator: but you left school in 1985?

Respondent: yes 1985

Facilitator: that's a long time ago, why did you leave school?

Respondent: My mother was a single mother and so I had to assist her, she couldn't afford to pay for my education

Facilitator: so you stopped schooling, were you the eldest child or ..?

Respondent: No I just stopped schooling and decided to look for work so that I can help her, I am the eldest in the family, I had four other siblings after me, so life was difficult for my mother, and then my mother got sick so I had to do something so that I can assist her with my younger sisters.

Facilitator: so when did you start working?

Respondent: 1995

Facilitator: I don't understand, you stopped schooling in 1985 or 1995..

Respondent: I left school in 1985 and then started working in 1995

Facilitator: so between 1985 and 1995 what were you doing?

Respondent: I was home, doing peace jobs

Facilitator: what kind of peace jobs did you do?

Respondent: I worked at King Food, what we did there was Morvite, King Food

Facilitator: here at ..(unclear)

Respondent: yes

Facilitator: so how long did you work?

Respondent: it was temporary jobs

Facilitator: did they have unions?

Respondent: at the time there were no unions?

Facilitator: the rest of Potchefstroom?

Respondent: no there were no unions where I worked part time, unions only existed in government departments

Facilitator: so you didn't need a union at King Food?

Respondent: The workers were afraid to join unions, to date they still don't have a union

Facilitator: why?

Respondent: the problem is the people who are working there are much older, most of them have long service

Facilitator: so they don't want to get involved, they just want their monies

Respondent: they do not want to be disturbed

Facilitator: they don't want trouble, but the white people how are they treating them

Respondent: things are still the same, apartheid is still rife in Potchefstroom

Facilitator: it is alive. So after King Food where did you work?

Respondent: I went to work for Friendly Grocery

Facilitator: so for the past 9 years you've been working for Friendly Grocery, do they have a union?

Respondent: no there was no union

Facilitator: how was the union introduced?

Respondent: I started the union because I am stubborn, they were continuously threatening that they will fire me, I said they can fire me, they were unable to fire me. I needed support, but no one was there to support me, so most of them left and I remained. New people were employed ..(unclear) – and then I started pushing them so that we join the union. That is how it was started

Facilitator: which union did you join?

Respondent: SACAWU

Facilitator: who introduced you to SACAWU?

Respondent: I went to Pick 'n Pay and they were on strike, I then learnt there was a union called SACAWU, I then asked who was in charge of SACAWU in Potchefstroom, they told me about Khumalo. I then met with him and he introduced me to the unions

Facilitator: when was this?

Respondent: it was this year, it's been six months now

Facilitator: first(unclear)

Respondent: it was 2011, I started last year

Facilitator: how did the white people take it?

Respondent: they were down, but they knew that one day I'm going to join a union, I told them I am here to stay and that I'm going nowhere. Now they understand that as workers we also have rights

Facilitator: so have you signed the Recognition Agreement with them?

Respondent: yes I signed it with them. They were not surprised that I joined a union, they expected it, I had been telling them that one day I am going to join a union

Facilitator: how was the workplace for the past 9 years without a union?

Respondent: I was stubborn if I wanted something I would ensure that I get what I needed, as long as I knew what I was doing was right, they had to support me

Facilitator: so they knew that you are likely to join a union?

Respondent: yes ..(unclear)

Facilitator: so what kind of problems did you come across?

Respondent: money, and the other things were hours of work, we worked abnormal hours, the other thing was we used separate toilets

Facilitator: at this day in age?

Respondent: yes, but now we use the same toilets since we joined the union, everything is okay

Facilitator: so before you joined the union you never approached them about your grievances?

Respondent: I used to approach them, they used to say I'm a bully, if I was not happy with something I would force them, I would use the same toilets as them – I used to give them a hard time. When it comes to money and hours of work, I used to work 8 hours not more than that, after 8 hours I would go home. And I would take my tea time at the right time. So that is how I dealt with them.

Facilitator: why were they afraid to fire you?

Respondent: they knew what they were doing is wrong, I always told them if they were doing something wrong

Facilitator: what about money, did they sort it out?

Respondent: yes they did. I have always been paid the correct amount .., I was fighting for other people, everything is okay now at Friendly since we have a union

Facilitator: the working hours?

Respondent: they have fixed that, we take our tea time, we have lunch but all along we could not take lunch or tea time. One would work from 7 to 7 with no break, no lunch, no nothing

Facilitator: How did people cope with no break, no lunch, no toilets for all these years?

Respondent: they had to cope, others would take their lunch packs and eat it in the toilet and go back to work, there was no lunch or tea break

Facilitator: before you the union was formed did they challenge the employer?

Respondent: yes I challenged them, but unfortunately I was all alone – so they would let me take my lunch break and not say anything

Facilitator: so why were the others quiet and let you fight alone?

Respondent: some of the people I found them there, they were about 6 and ..(unclear), they used to say they are there to work for their children/families and were afraid to get involved

Facilitator: so the employer used to shout at them ..?

Respondent: yes if they shouted and I intervened they would ask me not to intervene, I was against anything of Friendly, if there was a problem I would intervene and try to help them – some were fired for nothing

Facilitator: so they would fire you and not give you a chance?

Respondent: they gave them no chance, there were no warning letters, you would just be fired without any notice given.

Facilitator: the working conditions, how were they?

Respondent: everything is fine now, everybody is paid according to their job grading, if you are cooker you are paid as a cooker, if you are a baker you are paid as a baker

Facilitator: so what about training for you as a shop steward, are you being trained?

Respondent: no I am not getting any training

Facilitator: so you are going to disappear and go for training and leave the workers alone with the employer?

Respondent: I know that I need training, I would like to go but have not been, there are things that I am not familiar with and need to be trained on them

Facilitator: did everyone join the union now?

Respondent: yes

Facilitator: so it's the new young blood?

Respondent: yes

Facilitator: but are they ..(unclear)

Respondent: yes

Facilitator: what about benefits?

Respondent: we have UIF only, so I am trying to find out how we can go about getting the 13th cheque and .., we are still going to negotiate

Facilitator: what about issues of women, maternity leave etc.?

Respondent: they do not pay maternity benefits, if you go on maternity you go to the Dept of Labour but the employer does not pay out maternity leave. We are still busy with it, they have maternity leave without pay, if you go on maternity they do not pay you at the end of the month

Facilitator: any other benefits? (interruption, phone rang). We were talking about any other benefits?

Respondent: no maternity leave, you go on maternity but at the end of the month they do not pay you

Facilitator: ..(unclear)

Respondent: Friendly took me for training, I will not stay long here because there are no benefits

Facilitator: ..(unclear) where will you go if you leave this place?

Respondent: I've been promised a job around here

Facilitator: what about racism, how bad is it, can you prove that there's racism in the workplace?

Respondent: separate toilets, let's say we are two, the other one is white and I'm black and we are doing the same job, I will find that the white person is earning

more than me even though the person was employed after me. The whites still earn more money than us. The other thing is the white people have their own cups, it ends there. So you cannot use their cups.

Facilitator: so ..(unclear)

Respondent: things have changed

Facilitator: money also?

Respondent: yes, what is left is the provident fund and ..(unclear) – so we are going to meet to discuss the provident fund

Facilitator: so the union works for you?

Respondent: yes

Facilitator: Okay, thank you sisi

END

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