

## **Surprise Mokoena**

Facilitator: This is an interview with Surprise Mokoena, we are in Nigel, the date is 13 September 2012, interview is done by Brown Maaba. Comrade thanks very much for your time. You can speak any language, I will leave it to you.

Respondent: I speak Zulu

Facilitator: Okay. Please give me your background, your family background, where you were born?

Respondent: I was born on the 15<sup>th</sup> of September 1966 in the .., well it's a village called Chatters Town in Nigel. And I grew up in Duduza and then I started schooling in Duduza. My first working day was on 2 February 1987.

Facilitator: Your first day of school?

Respondent: Of work, 1987. I am not matriculated, it was standard 9 by then. I then stopped schooling due some unforeseen reasons amongst the family. You know families are not the same. If you had uniform, you had no money. We were seven at home. I had to leave school and go work for my sisters. And then I started on 2 February, at Citton SA

Facilitator: Citton SA?

Respondent: Yes I started there. I worked from 1987 and by .., as a general labourer, I was promoted to a position as a production chaser in planning department. I chased the product, checking, prioritise what we dispatching tomorrow, what we despatch and all that. I chased the product until 1991, where I was promoted as a training officer. I went to do the course with the NPI in Pretoria

Facilitator: What's NPI?

Respondent: National Productivity Institute in Pretoria. I was promoted to be a training officer doing 6M Course as a trainer. 6M Course is a business programme which was designed to change attitude of employees because some employees didn't understand where does that they work for comes from. And then I've done that. I've done induction programme, I've designed my own induction programme, doing the research, how the company was started and designed the programme out of that. What I noticed, whilst I was working, I've been checking the pay, the rates for employees. There was a guy, not a guy, an old man who was working, sweeping in the company. By then there was oppression if I can say that. I checked my rate and checked that man who was sweeping. He was getting his pay every week, I'm getting my pay on monthly basis. I am a training officer, but his pay was more than mine.

Facilitator: Really?

Respondent: Yes. I took the matter up with my superior, they told me there's nothing they can do that's how they adjusted the salaries. And then what happened, I worked one and half year in the same company under the same condition until I decide to get a job where I can work. I worked for Cards in Rosebank where we were doing .. - well I left the company.

Facilitator: You left

Respondent: I resigned from Citton that year. I went to a company called Cards, Career and Resources Development Strategies. It was in Rosebank, it was created by .., the lady was Terry Oakley-Smith. We were doing this voter education programme in the mines. I went to Carletonville, I went all around but I was employed for Xhosa because I'm a Sotho guy but I can speak Zulu/Xhosa/Sotho, you understand. I was employed for Xhosa, I've done that. Because the voting education and the votes came, what happened, we were retrenched. I looked for a job for seven years. In 1999 I went back to Citton again.

Facilitator: So for seven years you were unemployed?

Respondent: Unemployed

Facilitator: You did the voter education and then after that elections..?

Respondent: After the elections, after that I didn't get a job. I started my own thing for a living, I became creative because I bought a .., my sport is fishing. What happened is I went for fishing, sold fish, I even bought a second hand car selling fish.

Facilitator: You did fishing and sold the fish

Respondent: Bought a car, there's this four in one taxis in the locations, I've done that with that car, that car bought four cars

Facilitator: Really?

Respondent: Yes, because you see you can't rely on a moving business, a car ..(unclear) maybe you have no money. Some of the cars .., my business went down. I went back to Citton in 1999.

Facilitator: So you had taxis in the township?

Respondent: Yes I had those taxis, a four in one taxis. And then what happened is, because my business was going down. I decided to go back to Citton. I worked as a general labourer, as a cutter because we were working with leather, we were cutting leather. They designed leather from scratch, from cow to seat cover.

Facilitator: So it's a leather company?

Respondent: Yes it's a leather company, because I had been employed before, they gave me the cutting job. I went for the job. I moved from cutting and worked with the knives they used to cut seat covers, seat cuts, because the seat has got cuts, the cushions etc. Every seat had cuts. I worked at the Knive Store department, it belongs in the cutting department. I was elected as a shop steward, I can't recall what year it was. But I was elected as a shop steward, then 2006 they retrenched me. From then onwards I have not worked. That is about me.

Facilitator: Just to go back, you said you were born in a village?

Respondent: It's a .., you see, now it's a location called Arlapark, by then it was Chatterstown in Nigel. It was Arlapark.

Facilitator: So why did you guys leave that particular village, Chatterstown?

Respondent: In 1973 we were moved to Duduza when Duduza moved from Chatterstown, they moved all black people from that particular village, they built a location called Duduza. Duduza started 1963 but the first group went to Duduza 1963, they built the community houses. In 1973 we were moved to Duduza, that's where I grew up. I started schooling there. Oh, what happened, my mother, you know mothers, she met a guy, not my father. We went to Transkei, I woke up in life knowing Xhosa. And then I started schooling in a Xhosa school

Facilitator: In the Transkei?

Respondent: No here in Duduza. We came back, I was seven years by then, I started schooling at Dalinceba, because do you remember those apartheid days, when they say they don't take you in this school it's full, others would take you. You had no choice. I knew Xhosa. I started schooling from Sub A in those years, until standard 9 doing Xhosa. That is why I can speak Xhosa.

Facilitator: Interesting?

Respondent: And I'm a Sotho guy, *ko gae re bua Sesotho* (we speak Sesotho)

Facilitator: That happens a lot in Gauteng as you know. You dropped out of school because you needed to support the family?

Respondent: Ja we were seven at home, my mother was alone, we had no father, and well my big brother was a policeman who didn't care about us. My younger sisters were in school, I'm in school. I realised that because we had no home, we were renting where we lived. My mother was not with us, she was renting a place for us, she was not working. I had no shoes to finish school, I did start my matric class but could not finish because I had no shoes. I went to the family and asked for even a pair of old shoes, to finish my schooling. Some of my family are rich, I went to them and asked for any shoe to wear, even if it's a boot, so that I can finish just a year, to finish my matric. They said we also have kids to look after. I had to leave school and look for a job. I left school in 1986, I got a job in February at Citton.

Facilitator: And the kind of environment, this was your first job?

Respondent: Yes Citton was my first job

Facilitator: Did you enjoy your work there?

Respondent: At that time I enjoyed because I knew nothing about working in the factory. It was tough at first, for instance if you think of it, the exploitation, supervisors they would push you ..., sometimes we fought for that kind of behaviour. We fought with supervisors. In the end I was superior as well, I was pushing the job, I was chasing the job, talking to supervisors, don't do that, push that one, do that. I saw the pressure that they're in and started rolling, knowing what is happening in the factories and enjoyed until where my superior didn't understand my problem, the money I was paid was too little for the job I was doing, as a training officer, getting R1500 and the sweeper was paid R2100. If you calculate, four weeks and mine I am getting it once, I have high medical aid. There comes one company doing Voter Education at Citon, I asked them for a job. They offered me a job and paid me, from R1500 to R3500 was a lot of money

Facilitator: A lot of money

Respondent: Then I chose Cards, but it was a stupid decision because six months/seven months the job was finished, do you get the point. Then I stayed at home for seven years. I was doing something. For instance Citton didn't give me enough money, I've got two kids in Duduza. I've got a family, currently I've got a problem, I can't say it now because you are doing research. I don't stay there anymore, I have a house, two kids I was supporting by then, and I'm fighting for my family. I am now staying here in Tsakane, in a room, life.

Facilitator: That's life for you?

Respondent: Ja, that's life I can't talk about it.

Facilitator: But when you moved to the new job, the elections job, were you aware that the contract was going to be short?

Respondent: No they said they are doing literacy programme, I asked them first, what will happen after the votes, what jobs will we be doing. They told me that they have a lot of jobs that will be offered to us. Unfortunately they had to retrench, "last in, last out". I reminded them that when I left my job you told me you have enough jobs, what happened. They told me that they will call me, they never did. That was it.

Facilitator: The problems that were experienced by black employees before you left Citton, what kind of problems did you experience there?

Respondent: Meaning?

Facilitator: You had the majority of black workers?

Respondent: The whole company consisted of 1440 employees, which I worked with, which I trained.

Facilitator: Was there a union then in 1987?

Respondent: There was no union in 1987, I was still blank, I didn't know about a union, but there was a union afterwards which came, SACTU.

Facilitator: But then the problems that you experienced at work for instance, you complained about your salary?

Respondent: Yes

Facilitator: and there was no union?

Respondent: Yes there was no union by then. No I was not allowed to join the union because I was on salaried staff, I was on the staff side. On our side there was no union, by then, when I left the job. There was a union, SACTU, but on my side I was not allowed to join the union because you see you're working with management, whites etc.



Facilitator: So you were considered part of management?

Respondent: Yes

Facilitator: But there was a union?

Respondent: There was a union for hourly paid staff, it's salaried staff and hourly paid employees, that's the division. But in 1999 when I went back I was a union member

Facilitator: Member of SACTU?

Respondent: SACTU yes

Facilitator: Was it a strong union at Citton?

Respondent: Yes it was a strong union but some of the things were ..., if you didn't have an idea about what was going on politically, you wouldn't know, some things were perceived as sell outs, do you get the point. I worked for the company, I resigned to be a shop steward, because of some things I did not understand about unions..?

Facilitator: What kind of things?

Respondent: We once went on strike for salary increases. They signed on our behalf sometimes, just to settle the matter

Facilitator: The union?

Respondent: They called a guy from Port Elizabeth who came over, he was an organiser. There were guys from Soweto who were with us on strike. But because the strike was prolonged – some of the meetings we did not attend, they went alone and when they came back they said they had to settle by signing because the company and the union agreed. The employees did not give a mandate, we had to take whatever they gave to us. After a long time we went on strike. I felt that the organisers were bought by the employer. It's a strong union, to me the union cannot be strong without the workers. The people who must be strong are the workers. Take for instance what is happening in .., if it was a union, they should have considered Marikana, if it was a union some consideration should have been made, it's a company we will lost jobs if the company closes down, they should have taken that into consideration. But the employees, the members of the union in Marikana they're stronger than the union. That is why I'm saying you can't say the union is strong, it's the members who must strengthen the union.

Facilitator: But in your workplace was the union strong, or were the workers strong?

Respondent: Yes the workers were strong, but in most cases the union is a problem, because they would come up with tricks to cool the workers down. For instance we burning or if we're high they would come up with tricks to cool us down, they would find a way to make us understand why certain decisions were taken, we had to understand because we're hungry, we were looking for jobs etc. If the company goes down we stood to lose. If you go to Port Elizabeth or other leather sectors, the salary is not the same but they are controlled by one Bargaining Council, which is the National Bargaining Council of South Africa, the textile industry in Port Elizabeth.

The salary is not the same in Citton, you're a cutter in Bophuthatswana, Rustenburg. We are getting different salaries but we are doing the same job. We did a survey and discovered that we were not getting the same salaries even though we are from the same industry. The National Bargaining Council in Port Elizabeth for the leather industry did not even bother to ensure that the salaries were the same across the board.

Facilitator: So the strike that you had did it succeed?

Respondent: Yes, but you won't get what you want when you strike. This is what I told you now, some organisers from Port Elizabeth, SACTU's head office was in Port Elizabeth. A guy was sent to us, I can't remember his name, he was the negotiator during the strike. They went to a meeting one night, some of the shop stewards were not invited. The following day we were called to Jo'burg and told us that we must sign because there might be problems. To date I do not know what were the problems. We had to go back and give feedback to the workers, the workers wanted to know why were they not addressed on the matter. We didn't know why the decision was taken so we asked them to address the workers. If there's a strike, the employees should lead because if the employer offers 2% and employees want 5%. If I sign for the 2% employees will take us on, I have to report back to them first. Every step must be reported to the employees – we are the ones who must cool them off. If the employer meets us half way it is our duty to make employees understand that the employer met us half way. If this is not acceptable to the employees, we must go back to the employer and report even if the matter has to go to arbitration or labour court. People were called from Port Elizabeth, they came and signed an agreement on behalf of the workers with no explanation. They sign with the company with no consultation.

Things were different then as compared to now. They would say to us you are going to lose your jobs, please reconsider. So from 1999 I was working as a cutter. I was

then moved to Knife Store department. After that in 2006 December they retrenched. I never worked to date.

Facilitator: How long were you a shop steward?

Respondent: A year.

Facilitator: During that time what were the challenges from the shop floor?

Respondent: Too much, there were hearings. You see if employees who were union members had problems, we had to report back to the workers. The job of a shop steward is to liaise between the employees and employer. If there are changes in terms of salaries or other benefits, we must inform employees. In most cases, disciplinary hearings were quite a lot. The problem we had with employees was liquor, people used to get drunk. A lot of people are fired because of drinking problems, drinking is a major problem. Some workers abused alcohol. When I look back then, most of the problems were related to liquor, people would come to work late and drunk, some would be absent without permission because of liquor etc. Some people do not care. Currently I am unemployed. I knew that when I left Citton that I will not get employment anymore. It's a pity I do not have the capital to start something, I have a lot of things that I can do in life, it's unfortunate I do not have the capital to start something.

I once had a case, which I won. I fought for my people even if they were wrong. If an employee was given a notice of a hearing, I would meet with you after hours so that you can tell me what happened. He would tell me what happened and I will discuss with the employee and help him fight for his rights. I won a case. The guy came with liquor to work. They were drinking at the back, unfortunately the foreman was coloured guy who found them drinking. He did not take the liquor bottles with

as evidence. They destroyed the bottles and threw the bottles away. Someone was called to do the alcohol test, they were four. One of them unfortunately was too drunk because he tested positive. The other three denied that they were not drinking. They took the results and sealed the envelope. I was not at work at the time. I was called and told that Vusi is going for a hearing, he was caught with liquor. He told me what happened. I asked him why did they do such a thing. I told him we will try and save him. I capitalised on their mistakes, the security guard who caught them was white, he was careless. As a shop steward I needed clarity on the case and obtained information from the security guard. I first found out how long liquor remains in one's system, the security guard told me that liquor remains in one's system for 24 hours. This had happened on a Monday. I told him that this person drank on Sunday because there was a family gathering, he does not deny that he drank yesterday. So I told the security guard that he could have drank the day before, but the security guard insisted that he was found red handed with the liquor. So I asked him where is the proof because there is no evidence. He showed me the envelope with the results. We went to the hearing, he took out the very same results. I told them that he told me that he drank the day before, the security guard produced the results as evidence. I told him that the results he was producing at the hearing were not the right ones he has tampered with them. Remember he had opened the envelope for me, he was not supposed to, it was only supposed to be opened at the hearing. I capitalised on his negligence. The guard told the hearing that he opened the envelope. The case was kicked out because he tampered with the evidence. The evidence was not acceptable, the company was going for a dismissal. Other shop stewards would assist workers without the help of the union in order to strengthen the position of the union. Some unions are strong, others not. The union should flow with what the workers wants, and obtain a mandate from the workers. The union cannot be strong without the support of the workers. Members are the ones that strengthen a union. I can start a union, have the right communication skills, etc. The members will make me strong if the relationship is open between the members and the union. Members need to be guided, obtain mandates from members and report back to the members. Look at the issue of Marikana, the workers are angry (interruption, phone rang)

Facilitator: You were saying that if the workers are strong, the union will be strong too.

Respondent: The workers strengthens the union because they are the work who produce the company's product. The employer can decide to fire workers but at the end of the day he stands to lose more because he will need to train new people and by the time they are trained it would have cost him a lot. The other thing, once workers are divided into two, the union is f\*\*\*d, it won't work. An employer cannot work with half the workforce. Other workers will sell out their fellow colleagues. Some people lose their jobs because they are misled by their colleagues, the colleagues will say we go on strike we don't come back to work, they sneak and go to work the next thing you are unemployed for up to two years, the case, arbitration etc., they can take up to two years. If workers stick together and stand their ground this can make them strong.

Facilitator: You mentioned that some shop stewards take up management positions at Citton?

Respondent: Yes

Facilitator: Were the workers not against this?

Respondent: You know how it is with workers, they will not come out and say what they feel, they will talk through the grapevine, they will not face the shop stewards and tell them in their face. Some of the shop stewards were appointed as supervisors and managers. Out of 7 shop stewards, three was appointed into those positions. The strong ones will make workers understand things from management's point of view. Shop stewards in those days were not paid to be shop stewards, they would attend meetings in places like Durban etc., paid for by the union, obviously it

is from subscriptions. So shop stewards were not paid salaries as such, if a company offers you a better job, a better level or salary. As humans one would choose money and a better position. The four shop stewards that were not appointed into the positions continued with the union. New elections were held to replace the three, life goes on. Now the shop stewards have to meet head on with the previous shop steward. He is now part of management and will not understand things from our side, instead he will want us to understand things from his point of view, as a management member. Companies will use their power to attract the good shop stewards to better positions. The HR person resigned and shop stewards were encouraged to apply, one shop steward was appointed. He reported to us and we all felt that he sold out. The other thing that employers do is give a carrot to a good shop steward, if he accepts a management position he can no longer represent the workers. We are back to square one. He does not care about the workers anymore, he is now under pressure to perform on behalf of the company. The good ones are the ones that are tempted. Anything else you want to know from me.

Facilitator: So you became a shop steward for only one year?

Respondent: Yes one year only

Facilitator: What were your achievements when you look back?

Respondent: meaning, am not sure what you mean?

Facilitator: Shop steward issues?

Respondent: As indicated, most cases that I dealt with I managed to win, I had the right skill to defend the workers. There was a lot of pressure from management but I

dealt with it. Sometimes the oppression was visible. If a person was not favoured by management, I knew which steps to follow. For instance if you are dismissed, and I know that they are against you or they are not working within the confines of the law, or it's unfair dismissal – I knew which steps to follow in order to assist the employee. I already knew the pros and cons of the labour laws, the deadlines etc. I gained a lot of knowledge when I was a shop steward.

Facilitator: Why did you give up?

Respondent: Remember I told that we started having problems, we were fighting amongst ourselves and things like that. I was afraid we will start fighting physically, that is why I resigned as a shop steward. I did not understand why the union signed an agreement without clearing it with workers first. How can they sign without informing the workers. I felt betrayed, as part of the union I felt that the workers should have been part of the decision making process. A compromise was not reached with the workers, management did not meet us halfway in any way. The union is strengthened by its members, they have to get a mandate from the members. They are not supposed to make decisions for the workers. They can shed clarity but not decide on behalf of the workers. It's like if you engage services of a lawyer, the lawyer can advise you but cannot force you what to stay or to testify. That is why I left. There were some incidents where there was a shortage of in salaries, workers would be paid for three days although they worked for five days. Those are some of the challenges I faced as a shop steward. Negotiate with the employer and make him aware of his mistakes. In some cases the employer would take advantage that a person is not performing and fire them, the employer must exhaust all avenues before firing an employee, those are the worker rights. What made me really angry was for other shop stewards to sign an agreement on behalf of the workers without the permission of the workers. If workers are not happy they would picket during lunch, after picketing the go slow but all this will happen after the workers have submitted their grievances in writing. Some companies were liquidated because of the strikes.



Facilitator: So why did Citton close down?

Respondent: No it did not close down

Facilitator: But you were retrenched?

Respondent: We were retrenched, the company used to supply Mercedes, BMW, Audi in Germany with car seat covers. Sometimes the production was high sometimes not. They seemed to have a big warehouse. When we go towards negotiations the employer would make sure that there's enough stock. If there was no disturbance, September they would retrench. To date the system is still like that, people are working short time. Certain times they work long hours, sometimes 2 or 3 days a week, or we are laid off for a week sometimes. That is why I volunteered that there isn't much. Later on it was taken over by the Chinese, am not sure if the name of the company changed. The people I worked with told me that they work three days only, the salaries are low now. People are earning from hand to mouth, you have to find another way to increase your income. The company employs a lot of women. The company was classified as textile but it should have actually fallen under the motor industry. They used to employ a lot of people but because of the instability, most people left and joined Union Carriage. The company employed women in the majority and as you know women do not complain, all they care about is working for their children irrespective of the difficulties they are facing. Short time applied to weekly paid staff but management worked throughout the year, no short time.

Facilitator: Were women active in union issues?

Respondent: Yes they were but as you know they give up easy, they are the ones who would create a division amongst us, they cannot stand hunger for too long

Facilitator: Lastly, tell me about benefits, were workers happy with the benefits?

Respondent: There was a division there, management and hourly paid were not treated the same way. Which benefits are you referring to?

Facilitator: Medical aid, provident fund, pension fund etc.?

Respondent: Because we were paid very little we did not have a medical aid. There was a card that we used which was sent from PE. Doctors were appointed for us, we had to pay a certain amount of money, you were allowed to go up to 10 times, it was not a medical aid but a sick benefit fund. There were specific doctors that we had to go to, we went to see Rashid ., not good doctors. Sometimes you would not get medication, it was like visiting the clinic, the clinic was better because they gave better quality medication. The card did not pay well. In order to get good medication you had to pay cash. Management had the best medical aid cover. Provident fund was deducted by the PE scheme, a certain percentage would be deducted, the agreement was made with the union. I worked for the company from 1987 until 1992, I am telling you now the money I received was R2000. From 1999 to 2006 I was given R11 000 only. That is why I'm saying it seems things are going wrong everywhere. I wish I could start something but things are bad for me. I have a truck, the permit expired, as soon as I come right I am going to fix the truck and make it work for me. I will employ 5 boys and we carry rubble around the East Rand and generate income with it. I don't want a union.

Facilitator: Thanks for your time

**END**

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