

Maggie Magubane

Facilitator: this is an interview with Maggie Magubane, the interview is in Springs, the interview is done by Brown Maaba. Mama thanks very much for your time, you can talk English or Zulu or Sotho. Could you just give me a background of where you were born, the kind of family that you come from, was it a poor or rich family and what motivated you to eventually connect to labour issues, and eventually the struggle as a whole, just a starting point.

Respondent: Ja, my name is Maggie Madlala Magubane, I was born in Pimville Springs, and from a poor family, my mother was a domestic worker, my father was a factory worker. I started schooling at Ekwezi Primary School in Kwa-Thema then I moved to Kwa-Thema Combined school. From there I went to Tlakula, then Phakama. Then I got my Junior Certificate, that is what it was called by then, if I remember it was 1962. Then I did piece jobs, working at shops, domestic worker up until such time I attempted nursing, training as a nurse at Kalafong. Then from Kalafong I went to Natalspruit hospital, it was a new hospital by then. I couldn't finish up my nursing training because I fell pregnant. I started working in a factory called Western Premier Biscuits in Springs. It was in 1967 when I started working there. We worked there but I wasn't happy about the conditions of workers up until I was approached by two colleagues, they are both late, the other one Longi Khwelemthini and Alexander Mbolekwa, they approached me, it was 1972, they were talking about that, we have a workers committee in our factory, we must form another committee which has more teeth than this one because this one is toothless. Then I tried to get clarification I was told that there's a liaison committee, workers committee etc., the best one was apparently the

workers committee, something like that. Then we started having private meetings, asking workers to sign petitions and so forth. The petition was submitted to the manager of the factory, everything started there. That is where everything started, they wanted to know the drivers of this petition and I was nominated by the workers in 1972, by then we were attending some lectures on Saturdays at Christo Nkosi Highland. On Saturdays we would travel by kombis to Johannesburg to the Urban Training Project which was run by Eric Tyker and Dous Decker something like that. We used to have courses there and we were trained about trade unions etc.

In 1973 it happened that we formed a union called the Sweet Food and Allied Workers Union which was headed by Spokes Khakhane, he was the General Secretary of the Union, at the time I was the shop steward at Western Biscuits, towards the end of 1973 I resigned from the factory and became a full-time organiser of the union.

It happened around, after 1977/78, there were those talks, I think it was 1978 about forming another federation because the group of unions were under the Urban Training Project, so there were talks that there should be another big federation for SADTU, before COSATU, that is where everything started. FOSATU was formed but it was not nice to the Urban Training Project because they were against it

Facilitator: why in particular?

Respondent: They decided to form CWUSA because they said that FOSATU is not right, I can say CWUSA was purely black and FOSATU was mixed, the ideology was not good, they said no FOSATU will cause more strikes in the factories etc, and that it is politically motivated etc. Then

there was a big division in the Urban Training Project in so much that we split then there were court cases with Sweet Food and Allied Workers Union, in the end we won the case. I became the General Secretary of Sweet Food and Allied Workers Union. FOSATU was formed, also the Engineering and Allied Workers Union, the late Calvin Nkabinde was the General Secretary of Engineering, also the engineering union split, the other wing was taken by Jane Hlongwane, also the Food Union was split, also the chemical union was also split. Most of the unions split, others went to FOSATU others remained with CWUSA. We went on, in 1983 I resigned from Sweet Food and Allied Union, I went to MAWU, today it is called NUMSA. I worked for them as an organiser. Then Sweet Food and Allied Workers Union became the Food Beverage Union, something like that. Then in 1985 that is where COSATU was formed. In 1983 I worked for NUMSA and I was active especially on women issues, women fighting for women's rights, in fact in COSATU as a whole, I was very active fighting for women's rights, up until 1993 when we started campaigning for the national government elections. That is where we campaigned and in 1994 I became the MPL. For ten years I was an MPL in the Gauteng Legislature. This is my sixth or seventh year in Cape Town as an MP. What else do you want to know.

Facilitator: Going back, you said that you came from a poor family, your mother was a domestic worker and of course I would imagine that the living conditions were very low if you came from that particular background. Did that have an influence on how you perceived things and so on, you know the white world, the South African situation?

Respondent: I tell you we used to struggle, my mother was sickly but she used to go to work and she used to say my kids are still young, when they

are educated I will sit down and not work. She used to wake up very early at 4 o'clock to go and do the washing, at times bring the washing at home, wash it at home, take it back to the white people, clean and ironed. My father was using a bicycle to travel to work. We used to walk from White City, this is where we were staying, walk to Tornado Combined School. You know the manner in which we struggled, we couldn't have breakfast when we were leaving in the morning. Porridge from the previous night, this is what we would eat, the left over porridge, drink black tea with no milk. Actually we were not having porridge, the dry left overs of pap (isikhokho), we would drink that with tea, go to school, after school we go home, nothing to eat at home, cabbage and pap, if there's meat, we will be able to eat bones. My mother used to cook bones over the weekend, with cabbage. We didn't have shoes to put on, we would walk barefoot – our shirts were made from mealie meal bags, we used to struggle a lot. Hence I couldn't go beyond JC to Matric because at the time, my father used to say he cannot educate girls, at home we were four, and we were all girls. So after JC we all had to leave school after JC. We had to do nursing or teaching. So two of us attempted nursing at home, the other one is a lady teacher today. So that is how I grew up.

Facilitator: And if you look at the general conditions in Springs, Pimville, Brakpan, the relationship, how would you characterise that between different racial groups?

Respondent: I'll tell you it was difficult especially in Pimville, though I was still young but in Pimville we used to stay, especially the so-called black people in the area called *Amarounds*, Round 34, I was staying in Round 34 and there was an area separated from us, there it was a so-called

coloured area, Chipstans, and there were Chinese who had stores there, we used to buy there, buy bread, everything that we wanted. There was the separation. At night when we were sleeping, around 4, you would hear a loud knock on the door, police coming in .., we would see torches on our heads looking for people who were there illegally. If they found that person they would take him along. That was a tough life then. We used to walk from Pimville coming here to the city, coming to buy whatever, even here there were buses which were used by whites, buses which were used by blacks. So they started building Kwa-Thema in 1952 after there was a big strike which was led by Mama Dinah, Baba Khumalo, I remember even though I was still young because my mother was also involved in that strike. There was also a big Potato boycott around 1953 – the big strike Potato Strike in Bethal, it was a huge strike were people used to make clothes from sacks because they were boycotting potatoes. People were taken from here and taken to Bethal, some never returned, we believe some were buried in the fields. All such things I remember we used to struggle. At times we slept without eating at home. If there were leftovers from where our mothers worked as domestic workers we used to be happy on the day because that day will be Christmas at home. We were also not allowed to get into some shops only white people were allowed. If you were allowed to come in, we had to wait for the whites to buy first before we can be attended to. We were made to wait until they are finished serving white people. We were also forced to speak Afrikaans, if you can't speak Afrikaans you will not get anything from there. Up to the time when there were strikes, the uprising, after 1976-1985, we all struggled. This is when kids were killed, we couldn't go home. At the time I was highly involved in the trade unions, the state of emergency .., it was a very difficult time for us, because even in the trade unions we used to struggle, we were always on the run. There was

no difference. The police used to come at my home in White City to come and search in the wardrobes. They didn't even want to see a union t-shirt in the workshops. They would want to know what it was for even though they could see it was a union t-shirt. Life was very difficult then. My mother was very supportive to us, my father wasn't so supportive, my mother always supported me and helped me hide some of the things, the literature. We couldn't read those books openly, we had to hide the books. It was very difficult at the time.

During the 1976 uprisings, we never slept, the youngsters used to sleep in street corners, they would make fire with big tyres, guarding the townships. Children were killed at the cinema, Congress Keketso died at this time, we were there assisting, not knowing what will happen. Then 1994 came the elections, it was unbelievable.

Facilitator: At factory level, the environment, you were in the factories in the 1970s, that was the heart of apartheid, how did that hold the South African situation impact at the working environment level, in the 1970s in general, the relationship between the workers and the employers and so on?

Respondent: The employers, I must say, especially for women, at the time there were very few in factories, they never employed them, if they did employ them they were cleaners or making tea. Companies like Western Biscuits employed us but there were certain jobs which were reserved for men only, whites were also employed as supervisors not blacks. You would find a white boy fresh from school would be employed as your supervisor, with a bigger salary, there was a big gap on the salaries. There was segregation in the canteens, whites would eat alone so would blacks,

everything was different, their food was different from ours, tea breaks and lunch breaks, theirs was longer, everything was completely different. At the time we were treated like slaves I can say, we were made to run when we saw our white supervisors or bosses, run for no reason, you had to do something, pretend as if you are doing something even if there was no work to be done, that is how we used to live.

Facilitator: Did unions bring some changes?

Respondent: Yes big changes, though we struggled to build the unions because it was difficult but at the end there were changes. In the beginning it was difficult to distribute a pamphlet that explains what is a trade union, workers were afraid to read such material, we were perceived as terrorists when we were dishing out the pamphlets, workers were afraid to look outside. They would only co-operate when you go to them after work at their homes, they would promise to organise other workers, instead they will just peep and not say anything. At times when we were busy handing out the pamphlets, a police van would appear and we would be taken to the police station because you were distributing trade union pamphlets. When unions were recognised, after 1976, it took some time for the government to recognise the unions. Some factories did not accept trade unions, others did. I remember some of the factories, I was in the Sweet Food and Allied Union, the first factory that signed the recognition agreement was Kellogg, I was an organiser at the time. The late Chris Dlamini was a shop steward there, we signed the agreement, that was the first agreement, here in Kelloggs Springs, that was in 1978. This made history, that was an American company. Thereafter other companies followed by signing agreements, things were gradually changing, they realised that it is much better to work with Shop

Steward than to isolate them, then shop stewards started becoming active. Some companies promoted shop stewards to supervisors trying to tame the trade unions.

Facilitator: You also mentioned the fact that sometimes unions used to split, what was the course of that? Was there no tension as a result of such splits?

Respondent: It's because there was no clear direction as to what a trade union is, what it stands for because by then there are those people who believed that trade unions are attached to political activities, and if you are a trade unionist you are a worker, a pure worker, you mustn't talk about work things outside the gate, you must talk about things inside the factory only – when you talk about things outside the factory you are no longer a trade unionist, you are a populist. So you must be a worker and only talk about work issues only not outside things, you mustn't say I don't have gas, or I'm hungry you must only talk about work things like I worked for so many others, this is what I am earning, nothing beyond that. So the trade unions split. One other thing again other unions believed that when there are white people inside, the white people will infiltrate us, not give us good guidance, and that union members must be purely black, not white people.

Facilitator: which view prevailed?

Respondent: the multiracial view prevailed and was approved because FOSATU was formed, COSATU, unions merged up until today. CWUSA did not go anywhere up until now, a new union was formed, NACTU

Facilitator: what about IWUSA, it came in later but ...?

Respondent: IWUSA the Inkatha one never survived, it was formed particularly for hostel dwellers from KZN after COSATU was formed, they decided to form counter worker federation in Johannesburg but it didn't get anywhere

Facilitator: you were involved in the unions from the 1970s and also you were a woman, any negative impact from the male side about women in the forefront in the struggle at that time?

Respondent: I had a tough time I must tell you, it was very difficult, as an organiser, especially as a person who is organising workers, it was difficult but I persevered because when going to other provinces, especially in KZN they were telling me point blank that they won't be led by a woman and by then it was difficult to stand up and speak in front of men telling them that these are your rights, you must do this and that. They were saying who is this woman, where is she from, how can she come and address men, but I persevered. Even my comrades from here in Gauteng, I used to drive them, with a kombi load full of them, driving them from Johannesburg to KZN for the NEC meeting, bring them late or early hours in the morning on Monday, bring them back. You know they didn't ..., they agreed that this is our organiser but they were not happy to be led by a woman, but because of the situation that we are workers and she is there as a full time organiser we must just follow.

Facilitator: but did the situation remain as it was throughout?

Respondent: No it changed a lot, up until such time trade unions themselves fought for women's rights, things started to change, we were all equal, women are also workers, they must be respected equally, they must get the same salary for the same work. Some factories changed and started hiring women, they discovered that women are more productive because they can produce more than men, especially where you find that there's work which need softer hands like the telephones, there was a firm in Boksburg, STC, those small nuts women were able to handle them better than men, so such factories preferred to hire more women than men, that is why STC hired more women.

Facilitator: but in terms of taking advantage of women as an employer, leading to exploitation, were there such experiences?

Respondent: In some factories yes, in some factories employers used to say we cannot hire women because they are likely to become pregnant because they are interested in production, if the woman becomes pregnant then another person must be hired. Some employers had that negativity but things changed as time went on because they realised that women are more productive than their male counterparts. Salary wise women used to get lower salaries than men, because of trade unions things changed, it is much better now, black people are now in managerial positions.

Facilitator: Strategies that were implemented to bring the employer on the table by unions, were they always strike related or were there other ways of ensuring that the employers sit down with the workers to discuss issues around wages and so on?

Respondent: Before it was difficult because the procedures were so long so much that we used to persevere, take the employer to the table, negotiate, we used to negotiate with employers, employers would dig and dive. Most of the time we were negotiating and we used to be clear and when going to a meeting with a certain employer, we used to know our facts and most of the time we used to use the tactic of calling the directors of that company, in cases where there was an umbrella body owning certain companies, we would demand to see the top directors to come down and speak to us. We would sit down with them, talk to them, pushing them to open up their books, finance books so that we can see that there is no money, audited statements etc. I must say that strikes are a new thing, there were strikes before but not like now, we used to sit down, persevere, push the employers to the corner, report back to the workers, get a mandate from the workers, go back to the employers, at the end we would agree.

Facilitator: the political situation in the country, for instance in 1976, and the 1980s as well, there were a lot of upheavals and killings of course in the 1980s. How did that impact to the lives of the workers, the township situation?

Respondent: Workers were also dragged into these things during the killings in the townships because some of the workers were involved, some of the workers were killed, especially at the time of the train killings, workers who were using trains were killed in the trains and in those days it was difficult I must say because in the trains if you were talking Tsotsi taal, or Zulu – there were a lot of killings at the time, employers used to suffer because at times workers couldn't come to work because of the killings in the trains, because of the killings in the township next to the hostels, for

example the killings in Tokoza when Sam Ntuli was killed, he was a trade unionist. So a lot of factories were affected also because the production was affected. That is where trade unions started to get together with communities, boycotts etc, we not buying from town etc., that emanated from that.

Facilitator: Your involvement in the unions as an organiser, most of the time if not full time, of course somehow this had to balance with your social and your socio economic life. Was this sustainable to be in the forefront of the unions looking at family issues and so on and food that needs to be put on the table.

Respondent: You know when I first started with unions, sometimes without a salary for 6 months or so, but fortunately by then I was living with my parents when it was really difficult, and as I said my mother supported me, at the time I had one child. I think it was more easier on my side than others because I was fortunate or unfortunate .., I got married in 1972, my husband passed away before the end of 1972, I decided not to marry again. I told myself that I am giving my life to the struggle. I had no problems. It was easy for me.

Facilitator: Two more questions. What would you describe as the successes of union structures when you look back, during your era?

Respondent: Unions succeeded, we were operating under cover, hiding ourselves, government accepted us, even though there were strict rules like wanting to audit membership and so on, but we succeeded to get the unions recognised, registration of COSATU was a victory for us. We also succeeded to get factories to recognise black people to be in

managerial positions, also women were considered to be employed in the factories, it was normal for women to be employed as domestic workers or cleaners, that was a success for us.

Facilitator: any failures or hiccups when you look back?

Respondent: I can say we succeeded, we used to say trade unions should focus only on worker issues, not to get involved in political issues. When I look back now, the tri-partheid alliance, the current one, we are losing the boat somehow because COSATU workers federation, I agree as an alliance, they are now losing a focus now, that they are only a workers federation, they shouldn't get into political issues. We agree that they are a community, they are now overlooking the important labour issues and have lost a focus now. I think that is the mistake we have done so far. They want to have a say in the ANC, and if they do not get their way, they threaten to pull out, such things. That is one of the blunders.

Facilitator: what should have been the role of unions beyond 1994, according to your perception? In 1994 The ANC came into power, there is now a difference, the enemy is no longer there but the government is now led by the people themselves?

Respondent: I think the role of the unions, they were not supposed to become an alliance with the ANC, if you are a COSATU member or ANC member, this is what is being implied – they should have remained a loose federation and stick to labour issues, not rally behind the ANC. I agree that when we started in 1994 because we were starting with a new government, it was build out of COSATU, ANC and the SACP, they formed government in 1994, they should have taken their own directions

afterwards. Perhaps the federation would have remained more powerful when it comes to worker issues. Things would be much clearer. COSATU is presently capitalising on striking always, but when you go back to the factories, factories do not know their rights as workers, workers are suffering at the floor level. There are no longer effective shop stewards at factory level because they are now looking at ANC issues, they are failing to address shop floor issues at the factory level, as shop stewards. They cannot now sit down at a round table with employers and negotiate for workers rights, this is what we used to do but they are no longer doing. I'm sure we made a mistake somewhere somehow, that is my view.

Facilitator: any regrets after your involvement in labour issues and so on?

Respondent: I have no regrets at all, even though I'm in parliament now, you can differentiate a person from COSATU and a person who is not from COSATU, I'm not boasting. An MP which is from COSATU you can see that they do things differently, thoroughly and properly, they follow issues up to the end. But an MP who is not from COSATU, who is from somewhere or outside COSATU they are just doing things in their own way again I can say, not as thorough as a person from COSATU. We differ at the levels we are now, we can easily say this one is from COSATU, he is a worker, he is from the workers that is why he operates on this way. We insist on things and want to know how did things get to where they are. I am not regretting, I am so proud that I know where the struggle of the workers comes from, to get to where I am.

Facilitator: Is there something you think I haven't asked that is important during the interview?

Respondent: No

Facilitator: any closing word, just before that, the role of shop stewards, was it effective?

Respondent: shop stewards were very effective, they were effective, if you remember during our time, the time of Moses Maimdi, we used to do sleep ins at factories, sleep at employers offices until we get a response to our questions. We would sleep in and not leave the employers offices. Strikes were not as many as they are now. Employers knew that if we wanted answers we will get the answers to give back to the workers. The workers used to advise us on how to bargain, we always got guidance from the workers. Officials are now going public and telling the public what COSATU is saying, things are completely different now.

Facilitator: any closing word maybe in relation to labour issues?

Respondent: I want to encourage workers to choose good leaders to represent them, they should know that they are workers, they are also resident somewhere, they should fight for workers rights and fight for community issues separately, issues must not be mixed because they are weakening the workers federation.

Facilitator: thanks for your time.

End

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