

Dan Sebabi

Abstract

This interview tracks the life of Dan Sebabi, younger brother of David Sebabi who was one-time general secretary of MAWU. Dan describes growing up in a rural village in Blouberg, in current day Limpopo province. It was very close to the border with Botswana and Zimbabwe and as such was frequented by MK cadres who crossed both borders into and out of South Africa. With his brother involved in the developing trade union movement and exposed to ANC underground cadres in his own village, Dan became politically involved from an early age. He was regularly detained and imprisoned because of his political stance while working in various NGOs. It was only in 1996 that he was employed in his first formal job and joined NEHAWU as a trade union member. Sebabi gives his views on how the political stance of NEHAWU changed over time as NEHAWU's membership profile changed with the racial transformation of the civil service, offers frank views on the reasons for the political and socio-economic problems in the country today and what is needed to resolve these.

Facilitator: This is an interview with Dan Sebabi, we are in Polokwane, the date is 22 August 2012, interview is done by Brown Maaba.

Respondent: Thanks and you are most welcome

Facilitator: Kindly give me your background, where exactly do you come from?

Respondent: I come from a rural village on a border with Botswana in an area called, of late it is called Blouberg, in this district of Capricorn. I was born into a family of 9 girls and 9 brothers, one of whom introduced the family and myself into broadly the struggle for liberation and the trade union movement, the late comrade David Sebabi who was murdered in 1989, who played a very critical role in the founding of MAWU and later the founding of FOSATU. You would remember most of the trade union activities, around the East Rand and in particular around Benoni where you would have most of the offices of different unions. So one got cut into the trade union movement as early as middle 1980s because at that time we were given an opportunity to interact with the work of the trade unions though one was still a student, from time to time you would get that opportunity when there were activities or when you are on holiday you would be .., so sometimes when you come out of detention or something like that you would be allocated a particular minimal area of work in a trade union. That was how one really got to get into workers politics and worker struggles in and around that time.

Facilitator: So you left your home town to Johannesburg or you just ..?

Respondent: It was periodical, I spent most of my youth in school and between school and prison, that's how it happened. So obviously one would be moving around the country, in particular moving into and out of the PWV then Gauteng.

Facilitator: Imprisonment, were you involved in COSAS activities or was it ..?

Respondent: Not in a big way because the area I come from was deep rural at the time, we had information but we didn't really like .., so in youth struggles we were mostly involved in ..(interruption) the struggles of the youth congresses, guided by the UDF in the main and ja.

Facilitator: Do you have underground connections with the ANC, exile links and so on?

Respondent: Well that was normal because you would understand that our area where I come from is what you used to call national security areas because if you grew up there on the border, with Botswana and Zimbabwe there was quite a lot of military activity there. So obviously we had to provide some assistance to the MK operatives and all of that, various detachments would pass through our area and that also assisted to grow someone into more or less an activist. But there was really military work that was being done at the time. And you would remember some of the battles there, the battle that Mthatheli Nxube got involved with and the Jake Rapholo where two comrades died in the Seleka area, and even in town here in Polokwane, so we had quite a number of skirmishes with the system. And you would understand the commercial white farmers there were operatives of the security apparatus of the apartheid state. So it was more of a military zone for me. Basically that is the background.

Facilitator: In general the youth were they mostly in politics or it was just a certain cream, yourself, your brother and others or it was just a general thing to be in politics?

Respondent: You know getting into politics first is not by choice. You don't sit down and take a decision "now I'm becoming active", it's the

prevailing conditions that compel you into a particular situation and then .., at that time really in the rural villages the system was in charge, especially villages that were on the border, in particular with Zimbabwe, it was worse because you would remember in that period of the 1980s you then had your bombings on various military bases of MK in Zimbabwe and other countries in SADC. So it was really a tense period and you couldn't help to ignore the situation, you just couldn't ignore it. Now you have SADF coming into and putting up some operation centres and deploying platoons along the border and in the villages, harassing and torturing people at random and ...

Facilitator: And your parents how did they perceive this whole thing, I mean suddenly the children are involved in politics, your brother gets killed?

Respondent: I can't be in their boots but I can say it must have been quite stressful because sometimes you're under attack or you are captured and these guys would come with you to the village as a display, to show if you go this route this is what we will do with you

Facilitator: They exhibit you?

Respondent: Ja, I remember my other brother did a lot of work around assisting comrades to skip the country and .., because of our link with our .., some of our relatives in Zimbabwe, Botswana and all of that and when he was captured he was kept in some bush police station called Hannesburg, we used to call it a slaughter camp for over 9 months, in solitary confinement. You just couldn't even go and see him, you go and see him they give you a nice two/three hour torture just for delivering a

loaf of bread. You can imagine how the parents felt about that situation. I really can't explain their feeling at that point but they were a highly deeply Christian family, they understood but sometimes you would see your mother breaking down, it was just not nice. And sometimes they would get heavy threats and all of that, it was not a nice experience.

Facilitator: But on the whole when was your own life going to, towards a certain career, as a lawyer, as a teacher or you really saw yourself going towards unionism on a full time basis?

Respondent: Basically rural people were more exposed to teaching and nursing for girls, nursing used to be a woman's thing. So you can't have a young man coming from a traditional school and assisting a woman to give birth, you couldn't imagine that situation. One was more exposed to teaching but then you couldn't complete a diploma at that time when the president general says, gives a comment that we must make South Africa ungovernable, apartheid unworkable. So it was a terrible time. No but my future was more or less directed towards teaching. I don't regret that I'm not a teacher now. I don't think I would have contributed as much as I would have loved to.

Facilitator: So it never happened, you never went into teaching?

Respondent: No I did part time teaching, went to college and then there was prison and in and out, your Section 14 of the Security Act, you just get collected and *moered* for 14 days there. When you leave the police station you are picked up again within an hour or two, it becomes your life. So you could only survive by working with NGO's and all of that because you can't get into formal work. Now you see your life as a

young person being wasted away. You see that thing coming and you think will I ever get on my two feet as a social being and start a family and all of that. With the kind of torture that these guys were letting out in the rural police stations here you would sometimes even feel they are getting your life, you're still young and with a future ahead of you, that is it.

Facilitator: They could break you. And the first union that you joined formally, which one is it?

Respondent: I only did formal work from 1996 that's when I joined NEHAWU, formally as a member of a trade union.

Facilitator: All along you lived by NGO's?

Respondent: Ja I worked for various NGO's, established some and as a way of contributing because as an activist you were not expected just to sit back and .., you would always have to have something all the time and in between you would form youth groups and youth clubs to karate groups, yoyo, dance, song and all of them, so that you're always within and amongst the masses of our people and you always create that opportunity to pass the message through to your constituencies, you wouldn't really live there, some political gap unattended.

Facilitator: The nature of NEHAWU when you joined in 1996?

Respondent: When I joined, NEHAWU was more or less in the majority, a union of the down trodden, the most vulnerable in the public service sector, in the main your cleaners, people who worked for landscaping and clerks, in the main at the lowest ranks of the public service hierarchy

so .., and it was an age union in terms of membership, it's character of membership, you would have in the majority your traditional shop floor activism which younger people who were coming in really wouldn't easily adjust to because you had a union that would convene general meetings at the shop floor on monthly basis, their reports and all of these things. But then with the advent of democracy then you have a huge detachment of young people who are absorbed into the system with the ushering in of democracy and on average educated, who then becomes a new layer of membership in the union, in a sense that you have members that are fresh from student politics, coming into the labour market. They don't have that tradition of .., that depth of activism, where workers have to decide, worker control and all that. Where you have a membership that would even prefer to communicate with you, telephonically, other than sitting in a meeting under a tree in the workplace and discussing. So you then start to have a membership that would prefer prolonged negotiations on issues, not the traditional membership that would pick up arms and go to the street at the slightest provocation. When I got in, on average, my understanding is that the union was going through a sort of a transition from its traditional base to .., so you have government deciding, the Mbeki administration deciding no we must right size, we must do this and that and they come with, I think Resolution 1 I think of 2000 and something, I can't remember but there was a resolution that released thousands of workers at the lower ranks, when people wanted to deal with your Sunset clauses in their own way, they opened up, they developed an exit strategy for people to leave, unfortunately people who left were the most skilled and the ones at the lowest, the ones at the cold face of service delivery. So that impacts on NEHAWU as a union because now you remain with this membership that is quite elitist, membership that

..(unclear), exactly. So to me on average the union represented that when I joined it.

Facilitator: Over time

Respondent: But politically it was quite advanced at an ideological and theoretical level, on average I would say it was advanced.

Facilitator: This elitism was it phased out over time during your stay at NEHAWU?

Respondent: I was with NEHAWU for almost 12 if not 13 years, at regional level and for about a year and a half at provincial level before I came to COSATU.

Facilitator: You joined as what exactly?

Respondent: I just joined as an ordinary member and then you get elected at shop floor and you grow the system

Facilitator: So you were first a shop steward and then later on ..?

Respondent: Became an officer bearer at regional level, which then exposed me to being a member automatically in terms of the constitution of the central executive committee.

Facilitator: And what were the burning shop floor issues then? The burning shop floor issues that were faced by NEHAWU in the province when you joined, it was just post 1994 and just after apartheid. I'm not

sure whether things were getting better or worse in terms of the workers on the ground?

Respondent: I wouldn't say exactly because when I joined already there was that .., we were two years into democracy but I think what was a huge challenge for the union was, at a political level the union suffered brain drain with the new deployments into strategic positions. So government would tap in on the capacity that the union has built amongst these shop stewards and these officer bearers I think, at a political level that was a huge challenge for the union and the promises of a new Jerusalema of Josia Gumede, you know the ANC painted a picture and created a psyche that would make you believe that the ANC will deliver bread at everyone's doorstep as if things were gonna just happen automatically on their own without really giving the masses of our people the realities of economic challenges faced by a young democracy like ours at the time. So the challenges were quite huge because you had challenges of salary disparities, the integration of the former and white administrations of the Transvaal, the Free State and all of that, in particular here where you have to integrate the Transvaal Administration and the four Bantustans and you would really have big challenges of salary disparities where you would have a young black professional person who is an artisan being managed by someone who's never been to school because that person is white. That happened. It stressed most of the young people who were joining the system, to some extent it also couldn't help them stay long in the public service system, hence we had this backlog in terms of skilling and quality service delivery because that integration process also retained people who were pillars of the apartheid system and its neo-colonial characteristics, posture, so that these key pillars were retained in those key positions. So you had here in the

province, a system that remained intact and was consolidated by the ushering in of democracy. To me that is the real issue that we must deal with even now.

Facilitator: So over time we haven't succeeded to break this problem?

Respondent: Well .., we have provided services that were never provided before to former marginalised communities, but to me we have done very little at a socio economic level, very little. I appreciate your RDP houses or water connections, your roads and all of that. When you look at the quality of those things you will see a revolution at risk and this thing about us working towards ensuring that the socio economic status quo remains it kills my spirit. It makes me fail to understand what is it that I really struggled for, contributed, why did I contribute in the struggle, qualitative change of the lives of our people. You know when you look at Limpopo?

Facilitator: Not really, even though my father comes from there?

Respondent: Limpopo has got, amongst others three key economic activity sectors. It's your mining and agriculture. In these two main industries you don't have African people, you only have them as slaves of white monopoly capital that is male dominated. You go to Sekhukhune, the mining areas there, what you experience there is social dispossession. People have lost their land, they've lost everything to the mining houses, their lives have been disrupted and private security apparatus are managing communities on behalf of the mining houses, with the police watching, with government watching as if nothing is happening. Here in Limpopo you have a situation where people are still being killed by farmers and they buy out their murder cases in the court of law, they will

pay R75 000 for killing a darkie you will go home with a suspended sentence, here in Groblersdal. In the mining areas you have people who are walking with rubber bullets in their bodies, residents, owners of the land. Some are walking with platinum in their bodies, never operated upon, we're fighting that struggle. You go into agriculture it's worse because your former white commercial agricultural projects that have been restored to the owners of the land, on average 99% of them have collapsed. You don't seem to feel that political will to get things working. You can't believe workers here depend on the labour court in Braamfontein, that includes your Mpumalanga, Gauteng and Northwest and most of the Free State. Now for an ordinary worker, a cleaner, or a security guard to get his/her case on the court roll that person will die beforehand. If an employer takes a matter on review you know you have lost it. So your justice system now is for the elite. In fact the majority of our people have not arrived or tasted democracy.

Facilitator: And the Department of Labour hasn't done enough to make sure that they put pressure on the farmers and other employers, to meet the workers halfway?

Respondent: They can do whatever they can but I don't think they have sufficient capacity to deal with the issues here. Because in Limpopo, the formal sector employs almost 25% of the total labour force ..(unclear), the rest of the people are employed in just ordinary vulnerable sectors, because remember you know the worst thing about our democracy, even formal sector jobs have been casualised. So you have only government and mining here and what else, energy as ., energy anyway is only Medupi there which you can speak to as formal sector employers.

The rest, our comrades sold the whole of Waterberg, see golf estates mushrooming on the N1, so you no longer have productive agriculture

Facilitator: Ja, taking place

Respondent: And you have people who were farm dweller/workers driven out of the farms into the mushrooming RDP townships with no income whatsoever. People are starving, you go there into those areas you get stressed just by the sight of things, even before you interview anybody. So our struggle is at a point where .., surely it needs all of us to join hands otherwise we will go the Zimbabwe way. We are fortunate we have a fairly strong economy, that's the only fortunate part but running down that economy is also a huge possibility. Here in Limpopo we're running a recession of a special type, where you buy 750 ml Handy Andy for 500 000, just one, comrades are ..(unclear) government like nothing.

Facilitator: And I should take it that the levels of exploitation in this sectors is high, mining, farming .., which characterises the province?

Respondent: You know now in mining, the worst thing is human rights. Workers' rights as human rights. People are dying underground and nothing happens. And you know in terms of the mining it's very unsafe to act. Once a fatal accident happens it must immediately be reported to DMR or the licence is suspended, immediately, but here you have political interventions, here even at national level. They are the BEE partners. Communities shorthanded, it's a terrible situation. I can't speak agriculture, you know the issues, child labour and all of that, it's rampant, it's all over.

Facilitator: And labour brokers have taken advantage of this province?

Respondent: Labour brokers have taken over the entire economy of Limpopo because even in the mines, comrades work for labour brokers, they work for people who are sub-contracted to provide services whether it's Angloplat or Platinum Australia, De Beers, everybody. So in the majority workers work for labour brokers in a formal sector. That is why I say the jobs in the formal sector here have been downgraded in a big way. So the decent work agenda, the living wage campaign that is at the centre of the federation, survival itself is suffering blow by blow

Facilitator: And I should take it the issue of benefits, considering the circumstances if more or less out?

Respondent: Let's not talk benefits when people don't have a salary because you must first have a salary. Hence I'm saying our living wage campaign broadly is under attack.

Facilitator: Where to now considering the circumstances?

Respondent: It's a matter of policy development. To me what is critical for now is to break the grip of monopoly capital on our wealth, that is what's critical for me. And for us to do that we have .., you know funny enough, since the advent of democracy we have had on average about 80/90 Constitutional amendments. None of them worked for the poor and the working class. None of them, there was no noise. Now that there are proposals and the huge debate within the federation and within the alliance as a whole, on your sunset clauses ..(unclear) – so to me it's neither here nor there, it's not whether you have second transition or a

second phase of a thousand transitions. To me that thing doesn't make sense. We are theorising on a serious matter. To me what is important is to break the grip of capital monopoly, white male capital. To me that's what is critical. And to place correctly, mushrooming like an African business, which is not in the productive sectors of our economy, comrades mushroom and become millionaires out of equities, they don't open a small corner manufacturing shop and grow, they don't do that, they don't open a small agro process and plant and grow, no they get BEE'd by De Beers because of their positions, I'm a secretary of COSATU therefore some mine allocates with some equity shares. To me that's very stupid because these people are not business people. So for me is to ensure that we effect a constitutional amendment that will address the weaknesses in the apartheid economic structure that we have inherited and that we are so proud of as a liberation movement. Very proud of the apartheid economy, with all its weaknesses, structure and unemployment, it's blacks that must not be employed in the majority, education. You know our education system now doesn't talk to our young people being generators of knowledge, it talks about young people, whether it's CAPS 1,2,3, to me it's neither here nor there because it talks about our young people in biding [building?] knowledge generated by other people, for what purpose that's a question. So we need an education system that will seek to undo the injustice of apartheid in a monopoly capital, that to me is very critical. The same goes to health. Limpopo the health system has collapsed, education we don't even have text books, as we speak now. The infrastructure is collapsing. So to me, critical on the constitutional amendments is to ensure that .., because the Sunset Clauses lapsed in 1999, we should have long effected the necessary constitutional amendments and ensured that in a process manner we transfer the ownership of the wealth of the country to the people as a

whole. In a process manner, I'm not saying we must abruptly wake up and say we have nationalised mines, we have nationalised banks, we are not in Venezuela, we are in the Republic of South Africa. You look at Lula da Silva, how he did things in his own country, you can't understand why we can do these things. So for me critically is to transfer the wealth of the country to the people as a whole, in a process manner. This is what I believe the majority of us contributed to the liberation struggle, with that understanding. You go to Kabwe, you go to Morogoro, that's exactly what the ANC has said. But then we had a period, 25 years of driving the national democratic revolution in a full cycle. So we have a revolution that is in its 1912s.

Facilitator: Will COSATU make a major dent on these problems that are faced today? Whether it's health, whether it NEHAWU, or related problems FAWU?

Respondent: The challenge is capital fools people. Capital doesn't want for South Africa to discuss it. It wants the people of South Africa to discuss education that works for capital. Once you are educated you know your life will be better, you will get jobs. So I always say to comrades that the unfortunate thing is that the ANC as a prostitute slips more into the bed of capital than in the bed of the working class and the poor. The ANC has been defending capital so much, I remember President Mandela said at one point, during the first term of Mbeki. That we have done everything that these people wanted us to do. We liberalised our economy, tariffs and all of that. What do you get in return? They want to flood our markets, they don't open up their markets to our produce. We import but we can't export. So capital want to defend itself, protect itself from criticism from being analysed and understood, for its brutality and cruelty

to be understood by ordinary people, hawkers in the streets, ordinary people, the unemployed and so on. Hence I say it's a policy matter, that the ANC in its national conference must effect far-reaching policy decisions that will really .., people talk transitions and phases, I don't think that is where we must be. For example you can't say to me, South Africa doesn't have the necessary skills base, 20 years into democracy. What have we been doing with this 20 years, sleeping. You can't say that, even today we're still saying we can't produce correct teachers, we can teach in such a way that people after leaving school they will go into the labour market, 20 years. Are we saying we haven't even released the first detachment of our democracy, properly skilled

Facilitator: These are the first cadres

Respondent: Biologically the first detachment must be out in the field, from pregnancy through birth, the first detachment must be there as a policy matter. Thank you very much for coming. You took me through a process that I don't normally take.

Facilitator: Thanks very much for your insight, I appreciate it.

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