

Thembi Ngwenyama

Abstract

Thembi Ngwenyama was born in 1958 and has lived for the bulk of her life in Bophelong township in the Vaal. She became politically aware in her 20s becoming active later on. She touches on how many young people from her township went into exile and why she didn't. She describes the close-knit nature of her township at the time, their struggles over high rates and taxes and how they were without electricity for 8 months during one of these periods and the fear and harassment that they lived with in those times. She was employed by Nehawu in 1996 as an administrator who encouraged her to remain involved in alliance and community structures.

Facilitator: The interview is with Ms Thembi Ngwenyama, we are at the Vaal, the date is 29 September 2011, interview is done by Brown Maaba. Mama you are welcome to speak any language that suits you. Thanks very much for your time. Please give me a background as to where you were born, how you raised and how you ended up in the world of unions?

Respondent: I was born on 28 December 1958 in Evaton. I was raised by both parents. My father is from Mpumalanga and my mother is from Evaton, so we relocated to Bophelong Township in 1960. Apartheid was still in force at that time, I grew up under apartheid law. In 1965 I experienced something called Izwelethu, although I was still young but I was aware of what was happening around me because my mother was involved, although not deeply but she was involved somehow.

At the age of 20 when I started realising what was really going on, through the influence of the people around me who were politicised, this is how I grew politically.
(interruption)

Facilitator: So you were saying that you met some people at the age of 20 who introduced you to politics, who are they?

Respondent: It was my aunt Mrs Martha Morobi, others have since passed on. Although at first I didn't understand what was happening I had an interest. I think at the age of 30 I was politicised. I then met the likes of Stompie Mekgele around the time when people were going into exile. Mrs Morobi, Lucky Kamlani, they are now in the Council, they are still in the ANC. This is where I learnt about the struggle. Before the first National Elections in 1992, after the unbanning of the political parties, we formed structures in our township. I was then elected as the Secretary of the ANC Women's League, I was also an organiser in the ANC.

Facilitator: Just to go back a bit, when you turned 20 you met Martha Morobi

Respondent: I knew her before because she's my aunt, I got to know her better because of the politics, we became closer

Facilitator: were you still at school?

Respondent: I was still at school

Facilitator: The general talk at that time, what were people talking about?

Respondent: we talked a lot about the unbanning of the ANC and also about people going into exile and those that were arrested or released etc., that was the general talk, more especially the unbanning of political parties, we also talked about rates and taxes. When I was about 30 we talked about councillors, how we

didn't want them and all that. We had a lot of problems during the time of councillors, the rates and taxes were very high, the electricity and water supply would be cut because the fees were just too high. There was a time although I cannot remember which year, when electricity was cut off for about 8 months, we got used to not having electricity for about 8 months

Facilitator: 8 months, what was the issue?

Respondent: We were not paying the rates and taxes, everyone was under pressure even those that wanted to pay the community would attack them at the time, we called them *impimpis*. So after that we started structures by organising the community. The mood was very right at the time more especially after the national elections. People could see the light at the end of the tunnel, we knew that democracy was here. From there, I started working, I was somehow active – I assisted with marches. There was a time in 1973 or 1983, when there was a State of Emergency the whole of the Vaal Township, except Bophelong which was considered to be very quiet. The people from Vaal went to celebrate September 3 at Bophelong, this is when the strikes for rates and taxes began, it began at Bophelong, all councillors were there to address the community. It was supposed to be a peaceful general meeting but turned sour, when councillors started talking we burnt their houses, the riots started and spread to other townships. Today the day is celebrated at Bophelong Township.

And then the political leaders were released, President Mandela and the others. By then we were already on board with politics, we were ready for the elections. Pre national elections, a week or two before we were given an opportunity at Bophelong for President Mandela to come and address the community. Fortunately our request was granted and the President came to the township. Bophelong historically was 100% ANC, other political organisations were not discussed in Bophelong, if you spoke about other political organisations people would be surprised, they actually thought that the only political organisation in South Africa is

ANC only. Even during the elections, the percentage was the highest compared to other townships.

After that, I started working and slowed down with politics. When our people were elected as councillors they started changing, things changed completely. The councillors were threatened and there were threats, so and so will kill so and so that's when I decided to pull back a bit. At the time I was looking for a job and was interested in a career in unionism. I was employed by NEHAWU in 1993, I resigned where I was working. I was employed as an administrator, the union's focus was on worker struggles. I gained a lot of experience, although we were involved in worker struggles we were still involved in the other struggles of the country, as the alliance partner we were still working hand in hand with the ANC. We are still part of the ANC but we go there as deployees of COSATU. We attend general meetings and assist where necessary. The other thing which I learnt, although I was an administrator, we were given an opportunity to study, we studied at the University of Western Cape for three years, studying the Higher Certificate in Economic Development. I graduated in 2009. Nehawu paid for 350 women nationally to study this course. The course was not only labour based but it benefited the community, we could empower our communities from what we acquired from the programme. At the moment I joined an organisation called WAKA??, it deals with abused women and children. I will be able to put my skills to use. We are trying to involve all communities, we will later on deal with the elders, this is a big project which needs a lot of resources, it is something I cannot do alone.

Facilitator: Just to go back, you mentioned that in the 1980s some people were going into exile and so on?

Respondent: yes

Facilitator: why did you not decide to go yourself?

Respondent: There was a rumour that if you go into exile you go there forever, that was my fear, but I encouraged people who wanted to go. Some would leave from my home, for instance Stompie Mokgele would ask me to harbour some of them before they leave the country. Although I loved the action, I was afraid to die or to be shot, I wanted to see things happen, I am a good organiser, I am not lazy to work. Even before the national elections we walked around with people like Comrade Jessie Duarte, we were going house to house, sometimes going as far as Soweto to mobilise. But leaving the country was just not for me, nobody knew what was going to happen on the other side, nobody knew whether we would get democracy or not, and also I was worried what if it takes longer. My parents were older at the time and I could not leave them. We contributed a lot within the country. We used to spend our own money for the struggle to be successful

Facilitator: what about police harassment, or arrest?

Respondent: It was there. I remember my aunt's family had to leave this place to go and live in Evaton, I had to look after their home. Their son Thuso was arrested for having ammunition in his possession. He escaped from the cells and came straight home, he knocked and asked for money. I gave him money and he left. I didn't know what was going on but learnt from the news, I had to give him money over the window. My father and I knew about this and kept it a secret. Later on the police came looking for him and found Martin Luther King's photograph and took it, they searched the house, it was me and my brother, 20 people came looking for him, 3 Africans and the others were white. The neighbours were afraid to come and see what is happening because it was not safe for them to come closer, we were in danger, in those days the police could just kill you for no reason. It was a traumatic experience. When they came into the house they first told me that Thuso has been killed did I know. At the time I knew that Thuso was already out of the country. They also confiscated some of my books, for instance *The Plain Truth* – they assumed that the books were political and did not realise that the book was religious but they returned the books. The other harassment was during funerals of some of the

comrades. They would beat us up for going to the graveyard – they threw tear gas cylinders at us.

Facilitator: were your parents happy with what you were doing?

Respondent: My mother was very happy, my father was afraid for me, so we encouraged him to stay at his workplace. After the ANC and other political parties were unbanned, Stompie and the others were organised flags which were sewn by my mother, they just showed her the ANC colours. She enjoyed it very much. During the Sharpeville shooting she was involved. The SACP flag was designed by my brother. There was supposed to be a big march in Bophelong and the whole Vaal was supposed to participate, the day of the march there was also a funeral. The police did not care about the UDF flag nor the ANC flag. The minute they saw the SACP flag they started shooting, people were scattered all over, the hearse carrying the corpse had to drive off and people were running all over.

Facilitator: why was Bophelong such a quiet place?

Respondent: It's a small township and people know each other, maybe around 1400 people around 1999, they knew each other so well that if you did not belong you would be noticed coming off the bus. The streets were identified by names and so were the people. There was unity in Bophelong, if a person arrived at 10 in the evening, the young boys would just walk the right place. My family was well known because my father worked in a bottle store, he was also a photographer, he also played tennis, most people knew him. People in Bophelong were united. Things changed when the RDP houses were built, some of the people living in those houses are from Pretoria and other areas. The township has grown. The other thing is that about 30 something people went into exile, others attempted to escape but were forced to return. Fortunately nobody was arrested while attempting to skip the country. At the time when Inkatha was attacking in the East Rand, they attacked

Sebokeng but they never attempted Bophelong because of the unity. If something was wrong, everybody would attend the mass meeting including elderly people. It was not easy to infiltrate Bophelong. If one was suspected of being an impimpi the whole township would attack you.

Facilitator: How did it happen for you to join the unions?

Respondent: I was motivated by my participation in the ANC structures. The other companies which wanted to recruit me I felt that they were going to limit my participation in the struggle. I also believed that I do not want to be under a white person especially after my experience. My first experience was with a firm of lawyers, he was also involved in the struggle. He was once arrested with Chipa who worked for another labour movement which was an industrial aid centre and we were next door. The Vaal Council of Churches had also rented in our building and another organisation, I cannot remember the name, our general secretary works for the organisation. In previous years the building was targeted by the system, for instance towards June 16 political activists would be locked up and released afterwards. Then the attorney I worked for became involved in politics. Some of the people in exile were able to communicate with us. A fax was sent to us through the fax line. I also used to type pamphlets and one day my boss was arrested and he informed me that the police knew that the pamphlet was typed from this office I must be careful. We don't know how they found out – he also told me that the police will be coming to check our computers, the computer was then taken out of the building and replaced with another.

Facilitator: what was your impression of NEHAWU when you arrived in 1983, was it a new organisation or ..? When was NEHAWU formed?

Respondent: I don't know

Facilitator: what was your impression of the environment when you joined the unions, your first job?

Respondent: I adapted immediately. During the interview I was able to ascertain what is expected of me. They also wanted to know my involvement in the politics. My involvement in the community and the struggle was part of my CV and this is what they were looking for. That is how I was appointed. From there onwards I realised that the language used in union structures was the same language used in the townships. Most of the people who were taking part in community structures were also workers and affiliated to COSATU. All our meetings had to have a clause for ANC/SACP/COSATU, in some cases SANCO. During the elections NEHAWU deployed people to go and work for the ANC, some would be deployed up to five months or after the elections. Sometimes the ANC used our venue for their meetings. We were also encouraged to play a part in community structures. Information on how many members of the SACP/ANC are now holding positions in ANC or SANCO. For me I believe I am still in the struggle.

Facilitator: so you are working as a liaison administrator?

Respondent: yes

Facilitator: what were the challenges in the early 1990s because things changed after 1994 when you came in here?

Respondent: In NEHAWU?

Facilitator: yes, what were the demands and concerns, that was before democracy of course in 1993?

Respondent: I said I came here in 1994 I'm wrong I started here in 1996, let me check my payslip. I remember immediately after the elections I was still working for the very same attorney. I could not participate well in community activities, I had an interest in labour issues. Edward Chilo introduced me to NEHAWU, he was still working here at the time. Ja I joined here August 1996. Before he joined NEHAWU he was in the labour movement

Facilitator: really

Respondent: yes and he also went into exile, he was also arrested and served on Robben Island. He is the one who can give you the whole information. There's a lady from Meadowlands who came here to interview him, they were writing a book.

Facilitator: what were the demands of this office in 1996, what were the demands? Where was NEHAWU going to?

Respondent: I was not aware where it was going because at the time I did not even understand the constitution, I still had a lot to learn. After reading and understanding the constitution, direction was already there. I would hear people telling me their struggles, how they were sometimes paid and sometimes not paid.

Facilitator: Did NEHAWU's membership in this area grow after 1996 or did it go down?

Respondent: it is growing. Sometimes white people, let me say, before the elections I was told that it was difficult for workers to join the unions because they were afraid of being harassed or dismissed. There was no CCMA, or Labour Relations Act at the

time – if they did exist they must have been in favour of the employer. After the first National Elections, the Labour Relations Act was introduced. When I joined here it was already in existence. The Labour Relations Act protected the workers. When workers joined a union the Labour Relations Act protected them with immediate effect. Gradually people realised the importance of unions even though some employers were not fully receptive of unions. The employers would target shop stewards by retrenching them, this somehow reduced the membership. Gauteng has the biggest membership compared to other provinces. New institutions are still being formed, comrade Chipa is struggling alone as an organiser but the office bearers and the chair are assisting.

Facilitator: The role of women in NEHAWU how is it, in terms of positions where do they stand?

Respondent: NEHAWU when it comes to women the women are supported in large numbers, that is why women were the first people/workers in NEHAWU, shop stewards and officials who are females that is how women were taken on a course by NEHAWU

Facilitator: What criteria was used to select the women who went to UWC?

Respondent: Nationally I'm not sure but regionally what I know is that they wanted women who can be co-ordinators and fortunately they were not so many, I think three and then the women who were office bearers were also invited, officials who were administrators but if you were an official/organiser you were not allowed to. There's a course which ended last week: Advanced Labour Law which is attended by all shop stewards, people are capacitated. There are many courses, there's going to be an RSC Induction for all shop stewards. They are able to go to CCMA. I don't get involved in that because I deal with administration

Facilitator: but as an administrator since 1996 have you attended any courses?

Respondent: Yes I did some courses

Facilitator: did they help a lot?

Respondent: yes they have especially this recent one. I will be attending a course in October/November – it is a computer course for finance people. The shop stewards will be divided according to the areas they are in, some would be taught about finances, others will be taught about computers. NEHAWU also gives bursaries, it's unfortunate for some of us because one is too old to read.

Facilitator: In this field of NEHAWU how is the exploitation in the workplace?

Respondent: I wouldn't know, I think people like Chipa would know a lot about exploitation because he deals with them on daily basis. I will probably get to know about it when I have to type something related to exploitation.

Facilitator: What is the way forward with labour brokers?

Respondent: NEHAWU does not support labour brokers because they benefit more than the employees. Labour brokers are exploiting workers.

Facilitator: so has it affected you a lot in this area?

Respondent: It affects us a lot we are fighting against it. At the moment it is on the same level of COSATU. Chipa has had instances where he would write a letter to an institution and get a response from a broker or if he goes to defend a case at the CCMA he sometimes finds the labour broker representing the labour broker

Facilitator: so the workers do not go to the CCMA directly?

Respondent: I don't know how it is done, Edward knows best.

Facilitator: Has CCMA come through for the unions or are things still the same?

Respondent: I think it's the same, I am told that CCMA seems to be supporting employers, I hear this in the grapevine I have not heard it officially, Chipa can help you with the information.

Facilitator: over the years do you think it was worth it to be associated with the unions or would you have wanted to do something different?

Respondent: No I didn't want to do something different, I wanted to belong to a labour movement even though I did not know which one, that is how I met with Chipa to advise me. So when Chipa told me about NEHAWU I liked it. Fortunately at the time they did not have an administrator at the time, the position was advertised at a later stage. I did not look for a job and waited for the advertisement. I knew that they are going to appoint me, I wanted to work for NEHAWU. I had no interest in other jobs, I finally got the job with NEHAWU. The municipality offered me a job but I did not accept it because my participation was going to be limited

Facilitator: In what sense?

Respondent: Most of the officials there are neutral. Officials deal with the whole community not just members of the ANC, except if I was appointed as a councillor and there was no guarantee that I will get a job as a councillor, so that is why I chose NEHAWU. Chipa also told me about the policies and I was impressed – I also know most people working for NEHAWU, I understood them and wanted to be close to them

Facilitator: has there been growth for you when you look back?

Respondent: Yes there's a lot of growth, educationally, I also learnt a lot from interacting with people, I also learnt attitudes of different types of people and had to know how to deal with them.

Facilitator: where do you see yourself in ten years?

Respondent: I don't want to lie, I can't tell you, I just want to see NEHAWU growing?

Facilitator: Will it not be affected by labour brokers?

Respondent: No we are going to do away with it, they will never succeed this is our country. Nothing is affected only the workers are affected, so if workers are affected we are also affected. Medi Clinic retrenched a lot of members, the very same comrade Chipa, because he was affected, he assisted them to get a CC so that they can get a job. Only a few people were interested and they are now having an income and are no longer looking for jobs.

Facilitator: Is there anything else that you think is important that we did not talk about?

Respondent: No

Facilitator: Any closing word on the issue of unions?

Respondent: All I can say is that unions represent not just workers but also communities, they are educational to the community, I cannot say workers only, if a worker is educated he will impart the knowledge to the community like they did with us by taking us on a course. For instance this furniture is new, the old one we are going to donate to an old age home

Facilitator: that's good. Thank you very much for your time

Respondent: Thank you

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