

Bonginkosi Maphanga

Facilitator: This is an interview with Bonginkosi Maphanga, we are in Nelspruit, the date is 8 August 2012, interview is done by Brown Maaba. Comrade thanks very much for your time, it's up to you which language you want to use, Zulu or Siswati. Please give me a background of where you come from, where you were born, issues around schooling and how you ended up in the world of unions?

Respondent: Thanks I was born in Buzini on 26 March 1980, grew up there, schooled in Buzini Primary and Gudula High school and completed my Matric in 1998, employed by Fedelity Springbok in the year 2000 and subsequently to that I was elected as a shop steward of SATAWU and occupied various positions in the structures of the union being the local chairperson of the security sector. I was also elected to the provincial, original chairperson of security in Mpumalanga in 2003. In 2004 up until 2006 I was the Provincial Chairperson of SATAWU in Mpumalanga, by then I was a member of the COSATU PEC, a member of SATAWU Executive Committee up until I was employed as an organiser of SATAWU 2007 to date. I am currently an organiser in Nelspruit local. I worked at Secunda local and I'm currently Provincial co-ordinator of security sector.

Facilitator: So when did you finish your Matric and what were your plans after Matric, did you have plans to go straight into unions?

Respondent: My plan was to go and study at university but because of the financial problem at home I was .., I impregnated somebody and felt that I must go and work so that I can support the baby. I then trained as a security officer in 1999 and then in 2000 I was employed

Facilitator: In the security industry?

Respondent: Yes

Facilitator: Why did you consider the security industry, why not other industries?

Respondent: By then it looked like the easiest job because I tried to go to Highveld in Witbank to work for the mines but it was difficult for me to get a job. So I was advised by some of my friends who were by then already in the security sector to say this is work that is available at the time. It was just a temporary arrangement knowing that once I'm employed I will go and look for other things.

Facilitator: Okay, things like what, what was your main passion?

Respondent: I wanted to be a doctor or lawyer but when I became a shop steward, I was sent for training etc., and then other comrades told me there's a future in the trade union movement and that I should not leave the trade union movement. So having occupied strategic positions in the union I then saw myself as part of .., I saw myself taking a more participatory role, being part of the trade union of SATAWU because I joined SATAWU when it was formed already.

Facilitator: It was formed already when you joined it?

Respondent: The year I joined SATAWU is the year in which it was formed, I was with SATAWU when things were not well. I witnessed the first ..(unclear) of SATAWU when Spoornet broke away to reform SARWU

Facilitator: When was SATAWU formed?

Respondent: It was formed on 18 May 2000.

Facilitator: And before that there was no union in this sector?

Respondent: No there was a union in the Transport and General Workers Union

Facilitator: Falling under COSATU?

Respondent: Yes falling under COSATU. The formation of SATAWU was as a result of a resolution that we must have one strong transport union, so it was then resolved that T and G and SARWU must merge, because even SARWU was under COSATU before the merger.

Facilitator: Did the merger go well?

Respondent: The merger went well, but after the merger there was a split, others felt that the .., because of the previous bilateral conditions that were existing in the previous unions, they wanted to impose to the new unions what happened previously – it was a different game altogether, therefore they felt that they must go back to their union because there were new things imposed on them which they were not aware of.

Facilitator: So they left to form a new union?

Respondent: Ja a rival union but the rival union was not registered with COSATU?

Facilitator: What was it called?

Respondent: SARWU?

Facilitator: Is it still there?

Respondent: I think it lost representation in the Transnet Bargaining Council as a result it was in collision with the UTATO which is dominated by white people in rail but we have been realistically told these days that it is extremely diminishing, it is in ICU. The doctors are about to confirm that soon they will be registered with the home affairs as deceased.

Facilitator: Were you active in politics at school?

Respondent: Yes

Facilitator: Tell me more about that?

Respondent: At school at primary level I was involved with SRC's until Matric, I occupied different positions there, secretary of the SRC, to the extent of being the president.

Facilitator: What were the pressing issues then when you were a student?

Respondent: By then because it was exploitation by teachers, you would be punished, you will find that there's no platform to raise your voice because by then it was prior 1994 and after 1994, because I was in a rural area we were not quite sure that we are now in democratic country even when they said do away with corporal punishment, but in our school teachers continued with corporal punishment. We learnt about this because of our communication with other students from different. We started resisting, and at times we were chased out of school.

Facilitator: So your first job you worked as..?

Respondent: A security

Facilitator: Which security company?

Respondent: Fidelity Springbok

Facilitator: Was there a union there?

Respondent: Yes, it was T and G and then Satawu

Facilitator: And your impression of this working environment?

Respondent: The security environment

Facilitator: Ja as you came in for the first time?

Respondent: It was tough, we had to wake up in the morning around 4 and to be back at 4, quarter to 6, even moving to a shop, everything was tough, it was extraordinary strict. It was a tough job and sometimes you had to search for people who are working there and they were not co operating as per the site specifications – and if you want to enforce that they will report you as a bad person. Sometimes the company was forced to relocate you to another site, maybe take you safeguard busses in the bushes being alone etc. It was a tough job for a youngster and as a youngster I lost consciousness, I didn't fear anything anymore.

Facilitator: You would just go for anything?

Respondent: Ja

Facilitator: What about safety issues, how safe were you in this tough industry?

Respondent: I think it was and I believe it is an unsafe job and it will remain unsafe

Facilitator: But then you found T and G there, did you join immediately?

Respondent: Yes I joined immediately

Facilitator: Did you know what unions were all about at that time?

Respondent: I was aware of unions because while I was still at school I used to hear about “*azikhwelwa*” and then we will see people like Elija Baai, Jay Naidoo on TV,

hear about Mbazhima Shilowa, there are strikes, you hear that teachers are not going to school or my father was working at Arnot, he used to be a member of NUM, so I heard about trade unions. And my active participation in politics, youth movement, before I was employed I was aware of.

Facilitator: Was T and G doing it's work?

Respondent: It was, because if you can look without dividing the union now, the union that we are now but most of the leaders in the union, most officials are products of T and G's, as members and as shop stewards.

Facilitator: Really. What were some of the milestones or achievements of T and G because it later got disbanded to form SATAWU, when you look back?

Respondent: The establishment of the sectoral determination of security industry, the establishment of the sectoral determination of contract cleaning and the ensuring that there are ratified bargaining councils, is as a result of the extraordinary effort by T and G, to the extend of the passenger bargaining council, it's as the result of effort of T and G. You can even look at people like Xola Phakathi, former provincial secretary of Eastern Cape of COSATU is currently MEC, he is a product of T and G. You look at Susan Shabangu, he also comes from T and G, Nathi ..., we have got many people occupying strategic positions in government and in private sectors coming from T and G.

Facilitator: Ja and these are high powered people? Was there a need to then form a new union?

Respondent: Based on the COSATU resolution to say COSATU is a federation, they allocate trade unions in terms of their scopes. If you look road freight and the passenger and Transnet or Spoornet this is defined in as transport, then the union, COSATU said we must have one giant transport union. I believe there was a need based on that.

Facilitator: You said you became a shop steward later on? When was it? Were you a shop steward of T and G or of SATAWU?

Respondent: I was a shop steward of T and G but immediately the same year we formed SATAWU

Facilitator: How old were you in the industry when you became a shop steward?

Respondent: I think I became a shop steward in less than two months time

Facilitator: Less than two months, just on arrival?

Respondent: Ja

Facilitator: What happened?

Respondent: Because there was a security national strike in 2000 and then the shop stewards called a general meeting to say there's a strike and we have seen on TV people in Johannesburg are toyi toying, what about us. And while we were in the meeting the branch manager came to the meeting and when he came I think I was

almost a month in the company and then the shop stewards were scared to ask him questions, so I was vocal and asked him questions and then they elected me. Because he was saying we are grateful that you didn't strike, but in Johannesburg there's strikes, so I said why is it different, what are they going to achieve after the strike, it will also be applicable to us. So then immediately there the branch manager was angry with me, calling me "you young man" the shop stewards did not defend me but I stood my ground. The following day the workers decided that I must be a shop steward, I refused to take the position but after the members consistently persisting I then stood as a shop steward. From that day I began to engage management.

Facilitator: What were the pressing issues then because you had to engage management, on what exactly?

Respondent: There were issues of transportation to work, payment of annual bonus, provident fund, payment of overtime, uniform, these were the issues that dominated at the time, duty rosters because sometimes you will be called to come in the morning and they will say you are deployed, you come to work and do not know where you are going to work, but we then said we need to have individual duty rosters so that I know that when I wake up in the morning where am I going to work, I must do a self posting.

Facilitator: Were all these resolved?

Respondent: There was progress but you know trade unions by its nature we resolve a problem, we move but sometimes employers take advantage ..., but in my view there was a huge progress because we .., through that strike the sectoral determination was there and the establishment of a programme fund was there in 2001, now since then there are duty rosters and there are stipulated hours of work to

say security officers must work so many hours per week, hours per month and claiming of overtime is being paid as contained in the sectoral determination.

Facilitator: So any other benefits that you wanted, medical aid?

Respondent: We pushed medical aid but up until now it remains an issue that it's been addressed at national level. The other issue was the establishment of the security industry bargaining council which we are still pushing at national level.

Facilitator: So it is not there, you don't have it at the moment?

Respondent: No we don't have it at the moment but we are still pushing and confidently that sooner we will establish such.

Facilitator: So you were shop steward for how long?

Respondent: I've been a shop steward for a period of 7 years.

Facilitator: What were the achievements and what were the failures, there must have been some problems?

Respondent: You see when you are a shop steward you are in the middle of two rocks because you have to fight with the employer on behalf of the employees, and once the employer is not meeting the demands then employees will begin to fight you or also begin to be suspicious with you and you have to create a good working relationship with the employer and once employees .., sometimes employees will

perceive that you are now a sell out because you are always with the employer, why are you laughing with them, these are the most challenges faced. I think it was and it still is the thinking of employees to date to say shop stewards must not be seen with the employer, going to a meeting with the employer driving with the employer etc., they think you have sold out you must be regarded as an enemy. And once you approach things as enemies on the side of the employer, the attitude will be hardened sometimes even on easy issues you don't get an amicable solution.

Facilitator: But would you say overall you did well?

Respondent: I did well.

Facilitator: Did you receive some training as a shop steward, you just had Matric only and then security training?

Respondent: The trainings in the trade unions is to actively participate in structures of the trade union, read the document given by the trade union but I got formal training while I was already an office bearer of the union whereby I was trained by the CCMA, they called commissioners from the CCMA to train us, so it is now that I am getting training but while I was still a shop steward, training was to attending union structures, always be close to organisers, leadership and they would share their experiences in terms of trade union background.

Facilitator: Did you have to deal with cases of disciplinary cases?

Respondent: Yes I represented workers in disciplinary cases

Facilitator: Most of the time was it the workers who were wrong or the employers, unfair dismissal or ill discipline from the side of the workers?

Respondent: It may be both, sometimes employers would un-procedurally institute a disciplinary hearing against an employee – a disciplinary hearing must report procedurally and substantively fair. If it is un-procedural then we capitalise on that.

Facilitator: So were some of the cases winnable?

Respondent: Some of the cases were winnable, some we lost, if we lost then we take it to appeal, even in appeal they uphold such decisions and then refer it to the CCMA through the organiser

Facilitator: What about ill discipline from the side of the workers, being drunk at work, late coming, theft and other things? Did you experience those things?

Respondent: Yes we did especially during pay days, employees would come to work being drunk or late at work and they will expect you to go and defend them. You can't say you're wrong, he will say you are my shop steward, I am paying the union you are expected to represent me regardless of whatever I've done and that therefore frustrate the progress because in my view trade unions may not always be used as defenders or fire extinguishers. Trade union must exist even if there are no problems so that you can explore with the employers on how best can you improve the working conditions without the hindrances of ill discipline.

Facilitator: So what happened, did you actually leave your job and then moved to another position within SATAWU, what exactly happened after 7 years?

Respondent: Like any other leader you will always want to go to another .., anyway what I can say is I had financial challenges, so there were jobs that I was approached to do but because SATAWU was always close to my heart then that's where I ended up because I thought I am no longer wanting to be a security officer.

Facilitator: You got tired of it

Respondent: Yes

Facilitator: And so you moved to which position, which job did you apply for?

Respondent: Local organiser in Secunda.

Facilitator: When was it when you got the job?

Respondent: It was in 2007

Facilitator: What were the challenges of organising in Secunda?

Respondent: When I got there there were no proper structures, no shop stewards, no sectoral meetings, the membership was less than what was required because our constitution requires that for you to have an office you must have a minimum of 1500 but the membership when I got there was less than 700. The ..(unclear) of the local was also a factor and this thing of fixed term contract because many employees in Secunda were contractors.

Facilitator: And how did you sort this thing out then?

Respondent: It was through establishing a good relationship with the employers and the service providers, being the client to say in the event company X's contract is terminated, then company B when it comes in they must then employ those employees. So by so doing you know that these are members of SATAWU even if they are in that company you will be able to sustain them.

Facilitator: But the workers were they willing to join the union, how much did they know about SATAWU?

Respondent: It was at 50/50, some would say we know SATAWU and some would say we don't know what a trade union is then we were compelled to explain what the union is, what the union does for its members.

Facilitator: And you were there for how long, in Secunda?

Respondent: I was there up until August 2008

Facilitator: Just for a year or so?

Respondent: Yes

Facilitator: Why did you leave?

Respondent: There was a vacancy here in Nelspruit

Facilitator: So was it worth it to be in Secunda as an organiser for SATAWU or your time was wasted there?

Respondent: It was worth it. I still remember the energeticness of shop stewards in that local and the debate structures in that local, the legacy that I left there was worth it. Unfortunately I knew some of the shop stewards before I went there that I led while I was still a leader (interruption).

Facilitator: So which sectors did you have to deal with, Transport and Allied Workers is broad, it includes security, transport as in ..(unclear)?

Respondent: I've been organising transport which consists of rail, road freight, passenger, security industry and contract cleaning and there was maritime in the form of the container, one of the container company in Sasol called SACD

Facilitator: And what are the problems and challenges faced by the workers in all the sectors, I mean rail road freight, well you talked about security then there's maritime?

Respondent: Exploitation by employers in terms of the hours of work, in terms of non payment of sleep out allowance especially in road freight, unplanned hours of work, you can't plan to say I will be reporting on duty from 6 to 2, sometimes you become compelled to exceed the normal working hours

Facilitator: And how did you deal with those things as SATAWU?

Respondent: I constantly engaged with the employer and found out what are the reasons but the employer will always say our existence is through the agreement that we have with the client so we must always make the client happy. So we have no choice, if we don't do what the client expect us to do you better close shop.

Facilitator: And then in terms of safety and security because freight and maritime really, those are heavy industries. Did people feel that they were safe enough, or injuries at work?

Respondent: Ja it sometimes happened that employees or drivers are involved in accidents and employers will tell you that you must then go and claim today workman's compensation and there's nothing they can do sometimes others became disabled, which is unfortunate

Facilitator: But has the union taken these cases seriously?

Respondent: We were taking it very seriously

Facilitator: Okay, some of the cases had to go to court and so on, for getting injured at work or disabled?

Respondent: Usually if somebody gets injured at work we claim through the Workmen's Compensation Fund so that the person gets paid, but if we find that the company was not registered and not paying to the Workman's Compensation Fund and therefore we would fight such companies to be held liable.

Facilitator: So the issue of exploitation has it ever been resolved, is it going to be resolved any time soon?

Respondent: It is resolvable but employers are different and historically material condition of employers and the nature of what was ..(unclear) it depends on the environment in which you are in. Some are transformative employers, some are not transformative which of course through the existence of the trade union and continue fighting and trade union is not an Alpha and Omega to say we are fighting from a to b once we reach b we close shop, we are going to be here for years to come. So by that it means problems will always be there

Facilitator: Ja and it will be dealt with?

Respondent: Ja

Facilitator: Health issues, HIV Aids and so on, are these the issues that also affect this particular sector?

Respondent: Yes it affects like in road freight they've taken that very seriously because you will find that a driver is living in a truck for more than ten days moving from Secunda to Zimbabwe, Secunda to Cape Town, what do you expect, that person is living in the bush and then you will find prostitutes around.

Facilitator: So has this also become a problem of the union or is it the drivers problem?

Respondent: Anything that affects members affects the union because the union is the members

Facilitator: Any steps that you have taken to deal with health issues?

Respondent: It has been addressed at national level, there's a wellness fee and our members are taught to say look when you go play it safe, condomise you see, we give them awareness to them to say in the event you play this game unsafe these will be the consequences.

Facilitator: In terms of benefits, rail road freight, are the workers happy?

Respondent: They are but like any other employee you negotiate annually then you are happy for a particular time and then the next year you negotiate again.

Facilitator: Were you happy to come to Nelspruit to work here as a local organiser?

Respondent: Of course

Facilitator: What are the challenges, what made you to be happy to come down here than Secunda?

Respondent: I became a member and a shop steward and a leader through this office, Nelspruit local. I know most of the companies in this local and it's one of the biggest locals in terms of the demarcations. I like challenges and I knew the

challenges of this local before I arrived so it was then easy for me to say these are the things that I must overcome.

Facilitator: And what were some of these challenges here, in Nelspruit?

Respondent: Look, I will say it was lack of commitment or lack of understanding of trade unionism by shop stewards and members and to the extent of some of the member's grievances or problems were lying in the office without being attended to which I had to do and put up systems and structures in place and also to educate shop stewards and members about trade unionism. In that process while we got that done, automatically membership increased.

Facilitator: Why was there no commitment, I mean Nelspruit is huge and you would understand that people are more like into unions and so on? Why was there no commitment on the side of the workers and an understanding of unions? What was wrong here?

Respondent: Maybe the manner in which issues were attended to previously may be one of the factors, I am using maybe I don't want to be conclusive?

Facilitator: And the present situation now, have things changed?

Respondent: It has changed, we are one of the biggest locals in SATAWU even though there is still more room for improvement but I think things have changed.

Facilitator: Have the numbers also increased?

Respondent: Drastically to an extent that we have now opened a new local which it's membership is from Nelspruit, we have opened a local in Malelane called Juda Tsotsetsi local, he is our first born local.

Facilitator: So is there any rival union here that competes in SATAWU in Nelspruit?

Respondent: It was dominated by BASCO, it was TAWUSA and BASCO.

Facilitator: They affiliate under ..?

Respondent: I am not sure as in FEDUSA, they are not affiliated to COSATU

Facilitator: But you managed to win their members?

Respondent: Yes

Facilitator: And yourself, where do you see yourself in 5 years?

Respondent: Still playing a critical role in SATAWU

Facilitator: I don't know whether SATAWU has been affected by labour brokers?

Respondent: Yes especially in the road freight industry, it's one of the

Facilitator: So what have you done to make sure you deal with the situation yourself as SATAWU?

Respondent: That's a matter that's been addressed at national level and SATAWU have taken that to COSATU which they are dealing with at government. So SATAWU was one of the trade unions which was affected by labour brokers and focal to COSATU that we must abolish this thing.

Facilitator: Is this a male industry the one that SATAWU finds itself in, or is it half male half female?

Respondent: Rail freight is dominated by males

Facilitator: With some women here and there?

Respondent: Ja with some especially in administration but most of the drivers are men.

Facilitator: Are women keen participants in SATAWU or are they just passive?

Respondent: They are participants, especially in our province, if you look at the leadership, in most of the locals you will find that in the four office bearers there are two females, two males. In the provincial leadership the provincial chairperson is female and when you go to national you find that .., in the presidency we have a female deputy president and a treasurer and out of this is national office bearers there are two and SATAWU is taking this thing of emancipation of women to strategic leadership very seriously.

Facilitator: Are all the men willing to be led by women?

Respondent: Definitely because once the congress has resolved no one can deviate from the resolution of the congress, when such resolutions are taken all men are there so they have to comply (interruption)

Facilitator: We were still talking about the issue of women ..?

Respondent: They are actively participating in the trade union and occupying strategic positions at local level, provincial level and national to the extent that even in the staff .., our staff in Mpumalanga is dominated by women.

Facilitator: And the labour laws of the country, do they benefit the unions or they are worse than before?

Respondent: They are, the current level was that they had was through the persistence by the trade unions so if you say they are not beneficial to us, you will be saying the product of us is detrimental to us.

Facilitator: And the officials themselves, Department of Labour officials, do they reach the ground?

Respondent: They are but sometimes they wanted to say .., to identify a problematic company then we will request that officials may you please come and do inspection then they will come.

Facilitator: And employment opportunities for youngsters in this industry? Have you pressed for that?

Respondent: The majority of our members are young, I would say employment opportunities are open for young people.

Facilitator: And lastly what is the future of SATAWU in the province?

Respondent: It looks very bright, it's one of the most influential provinces in SATAWU and in COSATU and of course we have a leadership that is visionarist, it looks bright. In going to our last congress we had four locals but now we have got six locals with the intention to grow.

Facilitator: Is there anything else that is important that you would want to add to this interview maybe?

Respondent: I think we touched on all the key important aspects.

Facilitator: Any closing word maybe?

Respondent: I appreciate the opportunity, for you to have this time so that I can reflect of my history in the trade union movement and the background and also the extraordinary love I have for the trade union and the challenges which we are faced with. But in a trade union is not always good or bad, it's a dynamic situation which you must confront the prevailing circumstances at a particular time that it arises.

Facilitator: Thanks very much for your time comrade.

Respondent: Thank you very much.

END

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