

## **Mpho Seane**

Facilitator: This is an interview with Ntate Mpho Seane, we are in Ga-Rankuwa, the date is 2 August 2012, interview is done by Brown Maaba. Feel free to speak any language you are comfortable with. Please give me your background as to where you are from, how you were raised, just your family background, schooling, etc.

Respondent: I was born in Alexandra 1956, we are five in the family, 3 brothers, two sisters, two brothers are late, I am left with two sisters. I went to school in Dube, Soweto, Moetapele Primary School, I then went to Phomolong, St Martin, it was called Blessed Martin at the time. From there I went to Orland North for Form I, but next year I was taken to Peks High School and repeated my Form 1 until Form 4. I left school after passing Standard 4

Facilitator: Peks High School?

Respondent: Yes in Polokwane, we called it Pietersburg in those days. From there I left Soweto and came back to Ga-Rankuwa, I can't remember the year. In 1976 I started working for Siemens Cables in Rosslyn to 1980. From 1980 to 1981 I worked for United Breweries in Ga-Rankuwa, I left and was home for two years. After that I went to Tunnel in Ga-Rankuwa, I didn't work for a long time, I left because the wages were very low. I then went and joined Praga Technical in Rosslyn from 1983 to 1985, I left. This was during the Bophuthatswana government, I left the country and went to Botswana

Facilitator: In 1985?

Respondent: Yes I left for Botswana, I went for training in Libya and came back after the military training, back into the country. I then joined Black Health and Allied Workers Union as an organiser. I worked with them for a year and resigned. I then joined the National Union of Public Service Workers (NUPS) as a regional organiser. In 1988 I joined the National Union of Public Service ..(unclear) as a regional organiser. I worked there until 2006.

Facilitator: That was a long time?

Respondent: Yes, that's when I left the unions and stayed home until now.

Facilitator: Why did you leave the world of unions?

Respondent: I left the unions because our union was merging with IMATU, our membership was in the municipalities, we had to merge with IMATU because members had to pay an agency fee, we were not members of the Bargaining Council at the time, so our members were paying double subscriptions, so we had to merge with IMATU in order for them to pay single subscriptions. That is why I left.

Facilitator: But in terms of benefits did you accrue some benefits?

Respondent: No

Facilitator: How did it work in terms of salaries, pensions and benefits for the public service, were there any of those things.

Respondent: Our union had financial problems, so we battled with payments for our provident funds, sometimes they paid sometimes they did not. So what would happen is at the end of the day when you leave there isn't much for you because the contributions were not done regularly, I can't say we got much when we left, the money was too little, in fact we were misled that contributions were made regularly and they were not

Facilitator: So they didn't contribute?

Respondent: No they didn't contribute to the provident fund

Facilitator: You were not aware?

Respondent: We were not aware that they are not contributing. We found out after we left that they didn't make regular contributions.

Facilitator: So where did that leave you? Were you going to look for another job or ..?

Respondent: No I had had enough about unions and decided not to be involved with unions anymore.

Facilitator: You said you were born in Alexandra but suddenly you were in Soweto, what happened, the movement from Soweto to Alexandra or from Alexandra to Soweto?

Respondent: I had to go and live with my uncle in Dube because he had no children

Facilitator: Did all of you move to Soweto?

Respondent: No just the two of us moved to Dube because our uncle didn't have children and he brought us up.

Facilitator: Did that shape your life in some way?

Respondent: No I was too young to notice anything, things were just the same for me at the time

Facilitator: And then suddenly you went to Pecks High School in Limpopo, why Limpopo?

Respondent: Our family was Catholic and you know as you grow up you make mistakes, you're naughty and things like that, they then moved me to Pecks boarding school, they decided to take me away from the township and I went to boarding school.

Facilitator: Was it worth it for you to go there?

Respondent: I would say yes and no because, my life changed because I had to change my home language, in Soweto we spoke Southern Sotho and I had to start

learning in Northern Sotho, which is a bit of a draw back but I had to catch up with the others

Facilitator: Did you manage?

Respondent: Yes I managed

Facilitator: Why boarding school?

Respondent: Maybe I was naughty and my uncle was worried that is why I say going to boarding school assisted me to some extent but to some no. The thing is at boarding school you can also associate with the wrong crowd and my life changed a bit

Facilitator: So what happened, you dropped off or were you kicked out?

Respondent: I dropped out of school

Facilitator: Hoping to do what with your life?

Respondent: No hoping to continue with my schooling but unfortunately because I got involved with the wrong crowd I could not continue. I don't blame my parents for not having gone to school I blame myself to be honest.

Facilitator: What happened to you then, what were you plans now that you had dropped out of school and I'm sure your parents do not want to live with someone who doesn't want to work?

Respondent: Yes that is why I had to move from Soweto to Ga-Rankuwa

Facilitator: Did you have relatives in Ga-Rankuwa?

Respondent: Yes I have relatives I joined them

Facilitator: So you worked for Siemens, which one?

Respondent: Here in Rosslyn

Facilitator: Did you come here to look for a job or did you come for ...?

Respondent: Initially I just came to live here

Facilitator: How did it happen in 1976 for you to get a job?

Respondent: I stayed home for quite some time and then somebody found me a job in Rosslyn

Facilitator: Your impression of the job at Siemens?

Respondent: My real job at Siemens

Facilitator: Yes how was it like considering that you later joined the union in the 1980s, in the 1970s what was the situation like in terms of unions?

Respondent: It was very bad, there was a union but it was not functional because it was during the apartheid era. Unions started operating in 1979 if my memory serves me well, people started joining and having an interest in unions in 1979

Facilitator: You were with Siemens at the time?

Respondent: Yes

Facilitator: How did the union start, how big was it in Siemens, would you say it was active?

Respondent: We were not so active because I remember when unions started they were 2. There was MAWU, am not so sure and I think with Electrical, I joined the Electrical union. I joined for only one year in Siemens and then in 1980 I left and joined Brewery, Brewery did not have a union. This was during the time of Mangope, Bophuthatswana did not allow unions according to legislation.

Facilitator: So there was nothing happening in terms of unions?

Respondent: Not in Bophuthatswana

Facilitator: So even at United Breweries

Respondent: No there were no unions.

Facilitator: Did workers not have grievances, what did they complain about, what about things like exploitation, racism, or anything like that?

Respondent: One would always feel oppressed but we had nowhere to go

Facilitator: During this time what was your understanding about unions, or did you not pay attention?

Respondent: I would say at the time, we were oppressed in Bophuthatswana, we couldn't do anything about the situation, even if you had the knowledge or information there was nothing you could do because unions were illegal in Bophuthatswana. Unions could not register in Bophuthatswana, it was an independent state – so if things came in from what we then called South Africa to Bophuthatswana they could not operate in Bophuthatswana.

Facilitator: Your decision to leave in 1985, why did you leave the country?

Respondent: Because of the oppression in Ga-Rankuwa during Mangope's time, I decided to go for military training outside the country



Facilitator: Were there other ground structures in place because I'm sure you didn't just leave the country?

Respondent: We formed them here in Ga-Rankuwa

Facilitator: What kind, were they BCM linked?

Respondent: Yes they were, I was a member of AZAPO

Facilitator: How strong was AZAPO in the area?

Respondent: We were very strong and active

Facilitator: Underground or ..?

Respondent: No openly, everyone knew, we were not afraid. But as time went on the system became stronger that is why I decided to leave

Facilitator: How did you find connections outside the country?

Respondent: I spoke to some comrades who created a passage for me to leave the country and I joined BCMA

Facilitator: Black Consciousness Movement of AZAPO? Where did you join?

Respondent: Yes, in Botswana

Facilitator: With people like Kgokong and Strike was there also?

Respondent: Yes, strike was there also

Facilitator: But your impression of exile life was it okay for you?

Respondent: Yes I was fine outside the country, Botswana was okay for me

Facilitator: What were your intentions, to go to the army or to go to school?

Respondent: To go to the army

Facilitator: So is that why you chose the Libya route?

Respondent: They chose for us because I happened to be in the group which was going for training and we had to go to Libya for training

Facilitator: The funders, who was funding you at the time?

Respondent: The Libyan government

Facilitator: Gadafi himself?

Respondent: Yes

Facilitator: So were BC cadres the only ones training in Libya or did you also have ANC cadres?

Respondent: In our camp we also had PAC members, if my memory serves me well I think it was us and the PAC cadres, I have no recollection of ANC cadres, if they were there they were in other camps. But there were only two camps that I know of, one was in Dangas, the other one in Tripoli and we were in Tripoli.

Facilitator: After training what were your plans, you went back to Botswana and then what, come back to South Africa?

Respondent: There was a plan to come back to South Africa

Facilitator: As soldiers or as just ordinary citizens?

Respondent: No were supposed to come and infiltrate the system in the country

Facilitator: Did it work?

Respondent: It did work

Facilitator: Can you unpack that for me?

Respondent: No I can't because I did not go to the TRC, I can't.

Facilitator: So the first time you joined a union was in 1988 as an organiser?

Respondent: No this was the second union I joined, I first joined National Union of Public Service (NUPS), I joined it in 1988

Facilitator: How were your impressions of NUPS, to this union?

Respondent: NUPS was one of the AZAPO unions falling under BC

Facilitator: It fell under ..(unclear)

Respondent: We had CUWUSA before NACTU

Facilitator: And then Black Health and Allied when did you join it?

Respondent: I joined it before National Union, it was independent

Facilitator: But then you were joining the unions for the first time as an organiser now?

Respondent: Yes

Facilitator: How much did you know about organising for unions in particular?

Respondent: It was tough, it is important to study labour laws in order to be a good organiser. It is important to understand the Labour Relations Act and represent workers I think you can be an organiser, you don't need to go to school, there is no school that can teach you how to be an organiser.

Facilitator: So do you think you managed?

Respondent: Firstly I struggled for the first few months, I struggled while I familiarised myself with the Labour Relations Act, I had to understand the clauses.

Facilitator: What were the challenges of Black Health and Allied Unions, what were the challenges, as an organiser it means you went to many of these industries?

Respondent: Ja, Black Health dealt a lot with hospitals, old age homes, pharmaceutical factories, etc.

Facilitator: Any pressing shop floor issues in those hospitals and so on, I'm sure as an organiser you knew about those dynamics?

Respondent: Ja there were a lot of problems, in most cases people knew nothing about unions. People just joined unions without understanding the purpose of joining

the union. Those were the challenges, we had to teach the workers – others assumed that because they were union members they can come to work late, or abscond, or stay away without giving valid reasons – they expected the unions to represent them for such cases and these were some of our challenges. In hospitals most employees was women, women can be unpredictable especially in unions, they were no good. You tell them something today the following day she repeats the same thing with the thinking that the union will represent her. So those were the challenges

Facilitator: How were those things resolved because if you tell people to do this they do the opposite?

Respondent: They need to be workshopped, workshops must be arranged by the union whereby they will be taught the rules of the union, without workshops unions will not succeed. Unions empower shop stewards, the members also need to have an understanding of the role of the union.

Facilitator: In Black Health and Allied Workers Union, how were the shop stewards, were they strong or did they leave everything on your shoulders?

Respondent: Some plants are strong others not, some people would have been in union structures for quite some time, others are fairly new and when they recruit new members they expect you to do everything for them. If you find the experienced ones you all work as a team and teach the new shop stewards and workers. It is important for shop stewards to understand their role, understand the Labour Relations Act, the disciplinary procedure. They all need to understand these things otherwise the union is dead.

Facilitator: Were the people eager to learn and to be part of this, were they militant or were they just fooling around?

Respondent: They were militant, with women others were not so confident and feared to move forward, others were willing to join and say they are militant and were part of the union structure irrespective of the circumstances. Fear played a very important role, white employers knew that if fear is instilled in a black person they have won because nothing is going to happen. If we were not fearful as black people we would have long taken our land back, but because of the fear which was instilled it took longer for us to take over our country. Other people were just interested in working for their children "what if I am shot, or die who is going to look after my family". Those are some of the things that held black people back.

Facilitator: What about exploitation at Black Health, you indicated that women were in the majority, how was it, did the employers take advantage that women were fearful?

Respondent: Yes the employer always took advantage of the situation, even in cases where we thought people are stronger, he would find a way to take advantage – they also used our people to their own advantage. Shop stewards also, if management can pick up that a shop steward is weak, he would use that to his advantage using the weaker link. If the union is not strong, management can tear the union apart. Remember in the early and late 1980s, people were afraid and were not as confident as they are now. A white person would threaten him and he would back off. If he is threatened he would just resign from the union without giving a reason, he was threatened by management. So the employer took advantage of that. Nothing is going to happen if we have fear in us.

Facilitator: What about benefits for women in this sector? Maternity etc.?

Respondent: In the late 1980s women struggled, they would go on maternity and would be paid by UIF, other women who were not paying UIF would go on maternity for six months and it would be unpaid. We tried to educate our people to pay UIF so that if they go on maternity they can get something, they didn't do it. But later on as time went on in the early 1990s, people started understanding the importance of benefits. The National Union of Public Service Workers dealt a lot with municipalities, they had the pension fund benefit. I think we are the first union to introduce provident fund in municipalities, we insisted for the provident fund to be introduced. In most municipalities, pension funds were controlled in Benoni, we called it a Benoni Pension Fund. When a person died, for instance let's say the husband dies, when the wife must claim she must go to Benoni, it was in some cases far for people living in Pretoria. Other people did not travel, you were just given an address. We insisted that the provident fund be introduced and eventually it was introduced.

Facilitator: You were working for the public service then?

Respondent: Yes I was in the public service then

Facilitator: With Black Health and Allied Workers Union did that ever work?

Respondent: No it never worked

Facilitator: What happened to your union, you said it was independent, is it still there or did it die?

Respondent: I think it died



Facilitator: What was the hope because it was sitting outside NACTU, outside COSATU, how was it going to survive?

Respondent: Remember in those days, people would just start their own unions, own it and the funds were paid directly to him, he was the owner

Facilitator: Did that work, to own unions?

Respondent: Yes in some instances it happened, people owned unions and controlled funds, the people at the lower levels had nothing to say. This worked in the early 1990s and late 1980s.

Facilitator: Why did you leave Black Health and Allied Workers Union?

Respondent: Well because I did not see any progress. One of the things I did not like was the fact that I tried to encourage them that we should join NACTU, they refused because they wanted to control the funds. I showed them the benefits of joining NACTU they still refused, we didn't see things in the same light unfortunately that is why I left them and joined the National Union of Public Service Workers. To tell the truth in order for me to join the National Union of Public Service Workers I was recruited from Black Health by my comrades who encouraged me to join them.

Facilitator: When you look back, at Black Health and Allied Workers Union what would you say ..., you were there for a year, what did you achieve in that year?

Respondent: To tell the honest fact I have nothing to show, I achieved nothing in the short period I was there. I am saying this because this was the first union I joined, I didn't achieve much.

Facilitator: What was the downside of being to that union, Black Health?

Respondent: As indicated, because it was an independent union it didn't have a lot of power ..., I don't know how to put it, I do not want to bad mouth anyone. I don't know what to say

Facilitator: It's okay. So you joined public union as an organiser with some experience at least?

Respondent: Yes with some experience and some members I brought from Black Health

Facilitator: So some people had faith in you?

Respondent: Ja

Facilitator: What was your impression of the Public Service Union when you arrived there, what needed to be done?

Respondent: Well when I joined the National Union of Public Service Workers I found it very strong, what we had to do was to strengthen it more because our rival in Pretoria, I was based in Pretoria, our rival was the Union of Pretoria Municipal Workers

currently known as SAMWU. In Johannesburg, Randfontein our rival was SABMAWU – so we had to increase our numbers by recruiting from those unions. We managed to get some of our members and they also managed to get some of our members to join them. It was a strong competition until we lost out because we were not part of Bargaining Councils – then IMATU and SAMWU became stronger and almost defeated us. We were then forced to merge with IMATU because their membership was more than ours. I can say we joined them because they were in the majority. We couldn't join SAMWU because our members did not like SAMWU and forced us to merge with IMATU.

Facilitator: So that was towards the end, before you left?

Respondent: Yes

Facilitator: But all along did Public Service Union run properly and efficiently when you came in in 1998

Respondent: Well there were problems, financial problems. When I joined them in 1992/93, firstly we did not submit our books for auditing; we had no financial statements; we were also not registered as a trade union with the Department of Labour, I had to push for us to be registered. We registered and given a registration certificate. But our biggest problem was management of finances. Our finances were not properly managed. Sometimes we could not provide financial statements for up to two years and it was a requirement by the Department of Labour that we submit such. So we had to submit the books to be updated as far back as 2/3 years.

Facilitator: So did that impact negatively in the end towards the union?

Respondent: Ja very much so.

Facilitator: What were the pressing issues with the Public Service Union on the ground, this was a completely different sector from hospitality where you came from?

Respondent: It also dealt with hospitals, old age homes, they also included municipalities.

Facilitator: Which made it more challenging?

Respondent: Yes it was more challenging, one organiser would organise municipality, hospitals, old age homes, clinics, different sectors at the same time. This was a big challenge.

Facilitator: But joining the Public Service Union did it automatically mean .., it meant joining NACTU ..?

Respondent: Yes it belonged to NACTU

Facilitator: But did it mean joining AZAPO as well, how did the workers understand it?

Respondent: We as organisers, because we were members of AZAPO we had to recruit our members to join AZAPO, we did not force them but we pushed the AZAPO policies.

Facilitator: Did it happen that some of the workers belonged to the ANC in the township but at work they happened to belong to NACTU, did it happen like that?

Respondent: Yes it happened like that, we did not force people in the townships to be members of AZAPO or any other political party for that matter.

Facilitator: And the tension between the unions, there was SAMWU and yourselves as Public Service, were there problems, because in the East Rand there was the issue of Inkatha vis a vis ANC linked unions? Was it ever serious in Pretoria, were there tensions?

Respondent: Not in Pretoria, it never happened, that this one is ANC, this one is AZAPO, the other one is Inkatha, it was not like that

Facilitator: But Public Service, who dominated it because NACTU had its own subdivisions, PAC, Azapo members. How was the Public Service, was it dominated by AZAPO or..?

Respondent: It was dominated by AZAPO but we also had PAC members but they knew that AZAPO dominated

Facilitator: Any struggle or tensions over positions and money and power between ..?

Respondent: As indicated, mostly we were AZAPO, when the PAC came they could not do anything because AZAPO dominated.

Facilitator: In some of the sectors, were there any that were dominated by the PAC with the same understanding that although they knew they are from AZAPO but a certain sector is dominated by PAC, even though they fell under NACTU. Did you have that or were all the unions dominated by AZAPO

Respondent: No some were dominated by PAC, we knew which ones were driven by PAC

Facilitator: Looking back, what would you say were the achievements for Public Service because you were there for a long time?

Respondent: We achieved a lot. Are you referring to workers

Facilitator: yes

Respondent: We pushed the agenda of the workers, we pushed for them, when we went to the negotiation table we represented our workers successfully

Facilitator: Successfully?

Respondent: Yes, in some instances we were unable to get all their demands but somewhere we gained a lot for them, defending workers .., we defended them. In disciplinary hearings we achieved a lot, we would gain in some cases we would lose because as you know the workers would not tell us everything, when you go for the disciplinary hearing, new things come up and you lose the case. Others we were able to win, some people were not honest and open to us to enable us to defend

them. You go to the hearing, management brings 4/5 witnesses and you lose the case. Some cases were winnable some not. We did not win all the cases.

Facilitator: Any downside of being in the Public Service Union?

Respondent: The downside was when I left, we lost our benefits as I've indicated, the union did not pay the subscriptions for our benefits. We thought they were paying and only realised at the end that they did not make payments on our behalf. At the moment I have lost faith in unions.

Facilitator: So in the end this thing was a draw back?

Respondent: Ja it was a draw back

Facilitator: But did you have an alternative maybe of getting another job or you just got used to being in the union?

Respondent: I got used to the union fraternity. My family knew that union structures were my life, now to go and look for another job and report to management was going to be a problem for me – it was not going to be easy for me to report to someone else.

Facilitator: Did 1994 bring changes into the world of unions, the new government, with new laws and new approach, labour laws etc.?

Respondent: For me I did not see any changes in 1994 to be honest with you. White people still held operational jobs at the lower levels, so workers were treated in the same way, they did not care that the government has changed and that blacks were leading in government. The fights on the shop floor remained the same. We still dealt with the old white racists, nothing changed. I was in Pretoria and had to deal with old white people in City Council, to date they are still running the City Council. They will have a black person here and there but whites are still in better positions.

Facilitator: So whatever that was drafted in parliament in other words never filtered through after 1994?

Respondent: You mean coming to the Labour Relations Act?

Facilitator: Ja

Respondent: no, maybe here and there, some of the clauses that were changed reached people on the ground. But the Labour Relations Act on its own I did not see any change in it because I was stationed in Pretoria – the way we dealt with issues, I did not have a sense that there were changes because I had to deal with white people in Pretoria, there wasn't much difference.

Facilitator: So was it worth it to be in the unions or do you feel your time was wasted?

Respondent: I can't say it was wasted because I did gain something from unions, I gained quite a lot, it wasn't all time wasted, I would be lying. I gained a lot.



Facilitator: In service training, did you guys receive some training or did you just ..., when you first arrived in union structures, you were not a trained person to deal with union issues?

Respondent: We were given training, that is why I said we also workshopped some of the members, we were given training.

Facilitator: So there was improvement in your skills?

Respondent: yes there was improvement, it wasn't all time wasted.

Facilitator: Are those skills applicable today because you are now sitting outside unions, are you able to use them?

Respondent: For me or for others?

Facilitator: It could be maybe helping someone and getting paid for it, giving them legal advice?

Respondent: yes I can help some people and advise them free of charge, I do not charge. I do help where necessary, others use my advice others don't.

Facilitator: So there's no need to charge them or you don't feel like charging them?

Respondent: I don't feel like charging them

Facilitator: Is there a need to charge them?

Respondent: If I can open an advice office I will charge, but from home I don't feel like charging them

Facilitator: But do you continue to benefit, your intellectual powers.

Respondent: yes

Facilitator: I don't know if labour brokers accepted in your time at Public Service before you took off, did that become a problem?

Respondent: I had left already

Facilitator: What is your take on labour brokers?

Respondent: My understanding of it is not fair at all because there's (Capacity here in Roslyn), I am told it does not treat people well – I don't see the government banning them now because it seems some members of parliament are benefiting from this. I don't think it will end now, it is still going to continue.

Facilitator: So in the end Public Service disbanded to join IMATU and that's when you left?

Respondent: Yes

Facilitator: Is IMATU still functioning?

Respondent: Yes it still functions, IMATU and SAMWU in the municipalities.

Facilitator: Is it stronger or weaker now?

Respondent: I really don't know, I haven't followed up, I've lost interest in unions

Facilitator: Have you lost interest or have you outgrown the unions?

Respondent: I've lost interest in unions.

Facilitator: But then how do you make a living or spend your time?

Respondent: There's nothing I can do my family supports me

Facilitator: Okay, is there something else which you think is important maybe which should have been part of this interview about unions?

Respondent: No I think I am fine

Facilitator: If you were to live your life again maybe, where would you change it, would you want to be a unionist again or .. you wouldn't?

Respondent: Change my life again .., I don't think I can be a unionist, I will be something better than a unionist.

Facilitator: So it wasn't good to be there in other words?

Respondent: No, I am responding to you saying changing my life – I wouldn't say it wasn't good it was good to some extent – I learnt a lot, you meet a lot of challenges, new challenges, others you win others you lose, but these are challenges. But changing my life, going back ..., well when I grew up my parents wanted me to become a doctor. My aunt was a nursing sister she wanted me to be a doctor but unfortunately I was not good, it was too difficult for me – but if I had to relieve my life I would go back to school to study, not become a doctor maybe something else. I was good with arithmetic. I would become an accountant or something like that.

Facilitator: Any closing word maybe?

Respondent: I thought we were finished when I said having belonged to a union contributed something I did not waste my time, I gained a lot from unions

Facilitator: it was worth it?

Respondent: Ja, I can use the skill and advise a person.

Facilitator: Thanks very much for your time

END

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