

## **John Mowbrey**

Facilitator: This is an interview with John Mowbrey we are in Athlone Cape Town, the date is 19 October 2009, interview is conducted by Brown Maaba. John thanks for your time, would you just unpack for me where you were born and how you eventually got connected to unions?

Respondent: Okay I was born in Jo'burg in Kensington, very shortly after that my parents went off to Bulawayo where I stayed, I was three so I don't remember any of that. We then returned to live in Edenvale outside Johannesburg where I grew up till the age of 9. And then from there we moved to KZN to a farm in the Natal midlands, my father had always wanted to farm, that was Greytown which by the way is where the Bumbatha rebellion, not that I knew that when I grew up it was not part of the history I was taught at school it was something I found out later in life. I then after finishing my schooling at the local school, Greytown High school I went to Pietermaritzburg University. Well let me not, after school I went to the army, I had to go to the army for nine months where somewhat ironically I was on ..(unclear) 67, I was at Zeerust on the Western Transvaal border at the time of the Wankee Incursion. I mean that's just the game, something you found out later in time.

After that I went to Pietermaritzburg University to do a BA, and ended up majoring in History and doing History Honours, I was mainly on sort of pre-lectured societies on Shaka, Gifekane??, all that kind of area of work. I also then did a Education Diploma. Now, it was while at university and I suppose my involvement in MUSAS in the liberal campus that I was radicalised, I was also radicalised obviously by the whole era, the 1968 European Rebellion if I can put it that way, student rebellion of Paris and

so forth were pretty much inspiring and also very quickly got swept up in that ..(unclear) so that also put me on the outside of the white society I had grown up in.

At university I was involved in various things, but the most important there was the university wages commissions which had been established at that time. We did .., one kind of part of that was just propagating trade unions for all, putting up stickers around the town or going out with little leaflets, I remember going to .., who's that fella, handing these things out and being totally naïve of the immediate past history including that at SACTU and actually being ..(unclear) by this worker about SACTU and why they were all a bit of cherry of joining any unions. Then I went back and found out more about it, because the actual studies were not about the immediate past South African history. The other was kind of doing surveys on farm labour wages around Maritzburg area. So through that involvement .., then I was on a teacher's loan from the Dept of Education in Natal. So I had to go and teach and I was sent to Glenwood High School in Durban, where I taught for a year and half and I was actually able to pay that loan off in that time partly because inflation had shifted the numbers if I can put it that way. I was very lucky that it reduced the amount that had to be paid out and the wages had shot up. So I managed to scrape out of that and .., it was sort of in the last term I was there that I was already interviewed and became editor of the South African Labour Bulletin. I was interviewed firstly by Eddie Webster at his house, and then by Rick Turner the political science lecturer who was assassinated in his backyard.

Becoming editor of the Labour Bulletin meant immediately I was the staff of the Institute for Industrial Education which was linked to the Trade Union

Advisory and Co-ordinating Council Unions that had emerged in and around the 1973 strikes, firstly with the general factory workers benefit fund and then specific unions. So you know, immediately although most of the work was ..(unclear) that wasn't a kind of modern production line, the early bulletins there I can say I produced the whole thing from .., other from the writers from ..(unclear) the thing to doing the printing. About 1976 or 1977, I was still with the Bulletin right up till 1978, I think it is but I had already become secretary to the chemical union for about a year, they were very small and weak, Omar Badsha, he had been the secretary before and he had decided to move on and the union had no money, so the Bulletin was kind of paying my wage and I was an organising secretary. At a later point I was then elected as the provincial secretary of TWAK, TWAK then in and around that time merged with what had been called the Industrial Workers of the Witwatersrand to form a national TWAK, about 1978 and a year later in 1979 formed FOSATU at which formed I became the Regional Secretary of FOSATU in what was then Natal designation, at a later point that province was actually split into the north and south region, it had quite a lot to do with the dynamics of the relationship to Buthelezi, Buthelezi was originally the kind of president or something or chair of the council. I mean the IE had been set up by Rick Turner, by people like Eddie but also Laurie Schlemmer who is much more liberal kind of sociologist and they had played, how can I put it, "we respect you". There was always this ongoing kind of manoeuvre to stay on the right side or end until mid 1980s when it just broke down and he went into .., COSATU, up to that time we had done what I can only call the ..(unclear) avoidance – direct conflict with Inkatha because many of our members were Inkatha members, and that northern Natal regional demand for a region was partly fuelled by desire to be able to handle our own politics in the heartland of Zululand I think. It was actually launched

by Buthelezi, he spoke at the launch of that FOSATU legion ..(unclear) footage of that.

What else can I say just quickly about that period, I mean the emphasis then was on organising basically multi-national companies who were sensitive to pressure, so a lot of the work involved organising but then also communicating with somebody in London, not with SACTU, a person like Murphy who had gone into exile from the TWAK unions after the bannings in 1976, I mean there had been bannings in 1974 before I came into the unions, people like Chilo, and Henson and then in 1976 again there were a whole group of bannings. So myself, Roby Josh and Alec Irwin survived and didn't get caught, I guess we just joined later that's how the bureaucracy works, they just list people. Ja as I say it was that focus because kind of like municipal workers, so we kind of serviced them, we weren't looking to organise them because we felt they were not a soft target, we weren't gonna get recognition, we weren't gonna be able to stabilise the union in that context whereas in multinational companies you could get international solidarity, you could get pressure from preferably from worker to worker. In places like Glacier Bearing I remember we brought up the Scottish shop steward from the plant in Glasgow and was most pissed off when he went to the gate of the factory and they wouldn't let him in – he was from the parent company.

I mean the whole façade to approach was, it was essentially underpinned by a view that one had to open up space for NACTU to consolidate the union, get the recognition, get stop orders which gave you some financial base, win rights so that you could kind of defend your organisation and it is good getting involved with community politics in a direct way and also then ..(unclear) did not become part of the UDF as

such nor did COSATU of course further down the line but then delivered much greater co-operation probably at that point in time. What else can I say? Ja, look and I mean I think from a point of view of getting the unions off the ground is not all that different from, in fact if you look at the way that NUM pursued matters, or Ramaphosa did, he in fact, it might sound a bit of cynical, but he renewed himself with big capital before he even started organising. He was working for a while, he was with the Urban Foundation on the board or something, that kind of pulled him in, but what it meant is when he started organising and talked to Anglo they were persuaded to give him basic rights given a bit of access and once that .., he managed to get through, he went through. That was the time of course when there was raging debate between what were called the UDF unions, but unions like SAH in East London in particular, there was the Kakine?? Faction in Durban who were particularly community orientated unions as they said, as they argued and as I say were in practice in somewhere like East London and then sort of Wilson Roundtree's boycotts. But the debate .., it did have to do with whether you were aligned fully within NDR and with the alliance or with the ANC, or not, there's an element to that. There were contacts between people who were inside and then the other UDF unions and elements from SACTU in London. But ja, a debate between, COSATU's more cautious approach I guess and those who quite often were looking for some kind of confrontation. I just lost my track somewhere there. And it was also the debate around whether the unions in the face of the Vayan Commission should register or shouldn't register. That debate was wider because that debate was also with food and canning and general worker's union here in the Western Cape who both at first, even though at first, even though food and canning was itself registered, the coloured union was registered, African Food and Canning couldn't be registered but operated in parallel as it

will, ..(unclear) they were very parallel, they worked together that is the position that Ray Alexander had adopted in 1956 when the union had been split. Ja, whether to register or not, FOSATU took the line that we should register, there were gains to be made. The main difficulty at the time was the way the race issue was dealt with in the first outcome, the first legislative thing or recommendation and FOSATU took a position that we will register as non-racial union and if you don't give it to us then we will withdraw. And in fact then they did in a number of the key cases, they actually registered the unions as non-racial. You know but it was a debate between that you are aligning yourself with the state that you accepting the state's authority vs the unregistered position which was that you .., you don't show allegiance to the state in any way but this is showing allegiance to the apartheid state.

You know, from COSATU, so I believe and I think history says that the consolidation approach, which also NUM was effectively doing was a large part of the foundation what COSATU became, many of the smaller unions were unable to sustain organisation in sufficient scale to make any kind of impact or they could make impact but often those got kind of wiped out in the aftermath. I mean for example, there's the Johannesburg strike of 1980 with Marvi and the Black Municipal Workers Union, Marvi interviewed quite a lot of people, they didn't even expect it, I'm not saying it was like hot heads who created an explosion, they didn't ..(unclear) interviewed Martin Sirry and he was with others, and ja it was not that they expected it but it blew up and after a week the state moved in and bust people out and the fact that everybody, he went into exile, Martin like others, Marvi, they survived for a while because then he died in mysterious circumstances. So but the union never really recovered on that side.

Okay, where did I go to? Basically in 1980 I was FOSATU secretary then I was elected out for a year, it turned out to be only for a year, the workers re-instated me because they said that I pay the telephone bills and the electricity bills sometimes because my successor ..(unclear) terribly to do this, so they then put me back. But for that year I was actually then .., what happened was that just at that point, we also funding clamp placed on FOSATU, we could not raise any funds from overseas, that had a particularly devastating effect on the ..(unclear) as such and then the educational kind of side of things, so it wasn't like there was much space, so the Catholic Church actually though, stiffened money through Bishop Hurley, stiffened money for directly to let us continue running our workshops and they gave me a stipend just to .., for a year or so where actually what I did then was pulled together the archives of the TWAK unions and the early days of FOSATU. That was later copied by Wits, I called ..(unclear) Andy Manson ..(unclear) Northwest, he is still there

Facilitator: I think he's still there, I know him from that, the University of the Northwest, I didn't know he was from Wits?

Respondent: He was in the oral history project and I'd known him at university, so he came, I think I copied most of that early stuff or even took it away, I'd be interested one day to go and check if it's there, it must be there somewhere, because you've got all the COSATU, I think the FOSATU stuff, a lot of it is there.

Then in 1982 I got tired of being in the provincial seat I joined Transport and General Workers Union and organised bus drivers in Kwa-Zulu for the next .., till 1987 when I moved across to SAMWU, I mean my experience

was in organising Durban Transport Management Board, Pietermaritzburg bus drivers, Kwa-Zulu transport which had depots throughout Kwa-Zulu. I mean highlights of that were 1984 was a strike at TTMB where we occupied two of the depots, it's quite well recorded in bulletins because it was seen as sort of a major strike, I mean eventually we were removed by the police, they came in and removed the workers from the depot by a point of a gun, nearly caused confusion because the drivers actually had cars and the police wanted them to just walk out the front gate and all their cars were at the back. But it was quite awakening, the strike started at 10 o'clock at night, they had finished their last shift and then we stayed in the depot for about 3 days, 3 nights, hardly any sleep and then we managed to mobilise FOSATU support from the Pinetown local because the main depot was in Parktown. And again it's so bizarre because we then elected a delegation to go and see the mayor and when we arrived at the City Hall, and were let in the whole ..(unclear) in the bottom level of the City Hall, a complete overreaction, they had somehow decided we were gonna march, it worked and they kind of half resolved our problems and went back. I mean there were series of KwaZulu transport was major undertaking, fairly liberal management actually so we got to, we won our rights and stop orders. There were many a strike repeatedly in all of these, of course they were illegal because bus drivers were regarded as central service workers under the then legislation. Also organised truck drivers, I think just about everything, I think also municipal workers, because T&G were sort of called the dustbin of FOSATU whenever workers gain. Other unions NUM and NUMSA who had very tight lines would send everybody off to the General Transport and General which was a hassle for our strategies because we were trying to build up a solid kind of foundation in the transport industry but in anyway got involved in some small municipalities and obviously in the city. So we had thing, the bus drivers



did very little to organise their fellow workers, they were something of an elite, militant they were, ..(unclear) some didn't try, but I don't know if this is how workers saw them, they were suspicious of them in sort of ordinary rank and file blue collar pro-..(unclear) and the cleaners you know and the refuse and eventually we made a breakthrough into DTMB workshops and then it was only actually later in the late 1980s that when we were then in SAMU that we organised again to penetrate more into Durban as a whole. Ja, so what can I say, it was it. And obviously in all of that period we were also organising towards, I wasn't directly involved in the Unity Talks to COSATU, I attended a couple of meetings, not all of them that was mainly led from FOSATU side by Alec Irwin, Joe Foster, those people.

Right then in the late, 1986/87 was very much about the formation of SAMWU that was under COSATU policy, SAMU was in effect the first merger to be brought about, I mean it was a .., it was quite a feat because there were the whole CTMWA here which had, which really had fairly bureaucratic union, well established, resources and the building. If you look at the history of that union, I'm saying this because I meant to be writing the history of SAMU, studied some of the stuff. There was always tension within CTMWA between it, conservative grouping for one, ..(unclear) name and elements who were influenced by the more Unity Movement, left positions and from time to time would seek to exert greater power, exert some kind of takeover or influence on the direction of the union and I don't want to go off into that history too much because it's not like my history, it's a separate one.

But in 1994 John Ernestson he became the secretary of that union, and they kind of cleaned up the union because there was fairly corrupt, there was the kind of, it was the kind Unity Movement with Dola Omar and the

Wings as their legal advisor in this process of struggle that they had to try and clean up the union. And you know once they succeeded then they basically at least ran a fairly ran a really clean union, they kind of hanged out, they were nowhere approached by FOSATU, about becoming part of FOSATU but never did. The reasons for that I'm not sure, Joe Foster who's from Western Cape did and became the secretary. But they did had quite a lot of relations with FOSATU thereafter in terms of educational support and stuff because they had started in the early 1980s to develop shop stewards structures in a more definite sense, more grassroots kind of organisation. Then there was Transport and General Workers Union, where I was from which was the FOSATU line and then you had a number of .., you had SAWU from the Eastern Cape, other general union CAWUSA from PE, the Municipal and General Workers Union from Jo'burg which was a kind of the remnants of the MAVI Union, it had changed its name and MUSA from KwaZulu which had been part of the, what was known as the National Federation of Trade Unions. I always get confused and say Natal because it really was Natal based.

So I mean I don't want to go into all of the details of the talks, but you know there were tensions around political line, what should happen, they nearly broke down, I mean I'm still studied and interviewed people. It was influenced by the fact that, from their side that SACTU said you going in and merge whether or not, unity is more important than some of these quibbles, these things about registered or don't register is an old debate because it was fairly clear by then, it wasn't a debate, the registered camp had achieved much greater advances at that point and not to register. Ja, and I mean how I ended up coming to SAMU I found it ironic because it was not that I particularly wished to go with the municipal workers but I argued it and in principle when we were breaking up like

this, we taking people out of T&G we must transfer resources with it and it's not an individual thing, it's a thing that a decision must be made about as I was the only person, everybody else was sticking with the bus drivers. I ended up arguing myself into joining the Municipal Union.

There were other things like driving to Cape Town, all the way from Natal, it's so different when you look at Trade Unionist today and they fly around. Really there's one time I drove from Port Shepstone, I had left Durban and went to Port Shepstone at 6 in the morning, I drove back to Durban picked up some people, I drove to Ladysmith picked up a whole lot more and drove all the way to Cape Town only by myself, we didn't have another driver for whatever, we didn't have another person who could drive, that was really a nightmare. And then I went to sleep in the boot of the car here until sort of 4 o'clock in the morning and the boot opened and I was woken by these screaming clothing thinking I was a corpse lying in the middle of Athlone. I did that a number of times, it's strange, at first the NEC of the union on the way back to Jo'burg a group of workers were killed and then well Transport System ..(unclear) – well 1990 came and unions grew, we grew incredibly rapidly, SAMU was by far the fastest growing union between 1990 and 1994 and then NEHAWU kind of picked and did the same thing there shortly thereafter, but I mean we literally doubled and tripled, I've got the figures somewhere, our membership in a very short period of time.

I mean in SAMU I was KwaZulu Natal organiser at first because there were whole kind of processes of manoeuvring between the different unions and whatever but also there was frankly a lack of understanding of what a union is, there was a very .., CTMWA who had the power to ..(unclear) company very much had this view that the union must be build from the

bottom up so they said we've got to see the organisation on the ground and we can't create a region, not until there's a lot of organisation. Now what that missed was that the "holdings" that we had in KwaZulu, we had Richards Bay, Newcastle, Ladysmith, Port Shepstone, we did not have Durban, we didn't have Maritzburg. What happens then is even if you bring workers together, well, we didn't even have a place to bring workers together, which was very difficult because you go to each of these places, the service workers they have, the leaders show no sense that there are other people around demanding and there's no place for you to discuss the strategic core of it, that you need to organise the big cities. So I nearly resigned at that point, I did, I told them either you do something about it and empower us to actually organise and unite the leaderships so the leadership in turn can wake up to the imperatives of where to organise or it's just got too frustrating. So my office bearers came and met with me and we got very drunk and ..(unclear) with two more resignations, carried on organisation and then the NEC then did create a regional structure and it helped a lot.

In 1990 then I became ..(unclear) the National Education Officer which ja, you know it was nice to get out from the cold face and from organising and workers demanding things immediately, all they do, it can be very tough out there. In that role obviously I was involved in developing educational programme, shop steward training and stuff and so forth but quickly too one got involved in all of the policy spaces that were then suddenly opening up because suddenly from being unions in resistance you were unions moving into a much more powerful position in society and because things had freed up, I mean that massive growth that we kind of undergone space, had opened up to consolidate unions in the early 1990s, .. (unclear) so because of the transition, the unbanning of the

ANC and so forth, one became part of loose alliance as it were, and obviously in particular questions of local government restructuring and what should happen to democratise local government. So I was then involved with Seremane in the National Local Government negotiating Forum which kind of linked parallel structure in the end to the CODESA and World Trade Centre Negotiations on the constitution. People like Alec Boraine, Moses Maekisa, Thozamile Botha, Macheke, were participants along beside me and Seremane was the kind COSATU reps, even though we were only from SAMU and Duma Nkosi was meant to be one but I don't think he surfaced anywhere, I think he was also caught up in the housing, people tended to get really over-extended at times. I tell you it was fairly kayotic, getting to who was actually clear about policy or not, what policy was who's and what was the ANC's policy. I think it only sorted itself out when we moved closer to CODESA where the real powers were, I mean it was very interesting. Of course what happened in one way is that labour inevitably became, I don't want to say sideline, inevitably like, I went to the labour front of reform rather than the political, we had people there but they were not necessarily in the driving seat of what was going on, whereas we could be more in the driving seat in kind of reform of training, battling to establish a bargaining council or centralised national bargaining terrain, all of which came out, although agreements were reached with the so called statutory side, there was a non-statutory and the statutory side to the forum, that side was composed, it was kind of two sided table of .., ja. What else about that. I can't really think of the crucial thing. The crucial actually thing at the end was this, where I was not very happy but in any event I suppose nobody was the compromisers where there wasn't this shift, I can't describe it now, where there was in effect democracy in separate areas for some while

before the boundaries were fully redrawn, the kind of way it was demarcated and so forth.

I was also briefly involved in the Cape Town Forum itself but there was peripheral, difficult to remember the details of these events because you spend so much time running around. Other than that, even though I was education officer, I was also involved in collective bargaining and all because there were only like two of us as officials at first and to ..,now I'm here. I was in National Education officer then I took on the workplace training side for a while, getting involved in the local government and the SETA all of which was very disillusioning quite frankly, it still is because nothing is coming out of it, there's no delivery coming out of it, they letting the CEO who is currently, should have been fired for qualification fraud, he had been my opposition early on, he came out of the .., he joined the ANC late, he came out of the BLA, he was a BLA councillor in late 1980s and he was on the statutory side of all these bargains and then ja, in our fights and arguments at SALGA I don't know why, well he changed you know how a lot of people did, he then joined ANC, he was an MP, joined the ANC at some time and ja, so I wasn't particularly happy about, this is what I call smoken mirrors. It's that, I did work in that, and later in 2000 or so I became the head of what we call the Organising and Development which covers all of the functions other than admin and finance, oversee the offices, operate there. So that's the kind of autobiographical take on it.

Facilitator: Just to recap on some few things, starting with your family background, I'm not sure when exactly were you born and why the family moved to Bulawayo and ..?

Respondent: Frankly I don't know, I mean I was born in 1948, my father had been in the war, had been in prisoner of war camp actually in Italy, was captured in Tabruk and he'd been in North Africa Campaign before he was captured. Suddenly one actually doesn't know all that much about one's father, he came back, he was a draftsman, I know he also had a couple of other qualifications, he'd grown up in the .., he kind of left school at standard 9 in the 1930s, in the great oppression and been a kind of ..., being a bicycle messenger or something in that period of time. And then later on, somewhere in the 1930s, he had actually gone to Cedar Agricultural College and then he managed some farms around the place and then he joined up and went to ..(unclear), so he would be working in Jo'burg, somewhere I'm not even quite sure, I suppose something arose at that time in then Rhodesia, why he returned again I'm not even quite sure. Why, did I end up on the left, it's not even on my background per se but should .., again you don't think about it at the time. My father was kind of United Party and in that sense was political. I my first year at university, I even went and canvassed for the ..(unclear) because they paid me it was my holiday in Greytown and it was actually quite interesting because I met these old boers who were solid National Party, or they were solid South African Party, so that meant they were United Party and then there were also other fascinating .., there was a Jewish/German couple and this guy was really .., she was a nurse and this guy .., he was completely shuttered by obviously the .., I think he had been in prison, concentration camps. So he found all these interesting people in this town he had lived or grown up in but the shift left I don't know, go to a liberal university, as I said it's not you get influenced by that, I remember we joining some march or something again, I can't even remember what it was against, but then one kind of gets to move left, as I said also the youth rebellion of the time, becoming part of the kind of

hippee generation and therefore being counter culture or anti- a lot of what it was and ja becoming more and more kind of angry with one's parents, those kind of authority. I always was rebellious, I can remember in my history class, somewhere like in Standard 9, posing this question to Mr van der Westhuizen who was my history teacher, this was a dual medium school, English and Afrikaans, everything was taught in both languages at the same time, they were kind of odd, there were a few around there, it was kind of a United Party thing. I think Smuts had supported this, the Nats wanted to close it down all the time. But posing this question to him it was in French Revolution or something, "but you know does this not mean that at the end of the day the society such as ours that the mass of black people are gonna take over". I don't think I had even thought it through, it was just a spontaneous response to the structure of history of masses rebelling and posing it, he didn't answer me, in fact he got quite upset and I think a couple of people in my class were also upset. I was rebellious at school, I was always getting into trouble and I ended up being a prefect, they tried to co-opt me.

So ja, the move at university, I mean it was more that counter-cultural thing at first. I mean there's obvious reality that there is, the system is unjust and all the rest of it, one got caught up in these. And the way it was ..(unclear) the commission was particular shift out of in a way. I mean it was also the response because I was first involved in the University Christian Movement, not that I was a Christian at all but it was the most radical of the groups on campus, very much polar//(unclear) and that kind of orientation and its actually where I went to a couple of .., there was one where Steve Biko was there, and talked on something or whatever, there were very tense kind of things up to a point and I think it was shortly after that that SASO was formed, actually I think a lot of their



getting together was through the UCM. There was obviously the white left, whatever was then both alienated in that sense from part of the struggle. But equally the influence of Marxist, Marxist thinking became very much present, you know it came out of that counter cultural, or the university student power or something like this often the authors, Robin Blackburn or others were Marxist, I mean that's the European thing. So one started reading Marxist tracks or communist manifestos or whatever you know because I was history. A lot of what I learned I learned outside of the curriculum entirely, there were no, not at Maritzburg, there was no sort of near Marxist think alike, Eddie Webster or Craig, or Eric Turner who were at Durban, you might sort of through some things you attended, lectures or events hear them speak. I mean Rick Turner's Eye of the Needle was particularly influential, I don't know if you know that book, it's ..(unclear). So I mean there's nothing in my family background other than that my father was kind of political, made politics an important issue in life. I think he sort of toyed with labour party at one point, the early Labour Party but I don't think he, and he may have been influenced a little by the Springbok Legend, educational stuff which some undertook. He was in prison ..(unclear) but after that he was there for about 18 months and then he as repatriated so, I don't think there was any

Facilitator: If I may ask, your shift to the left didn't it actually affect your family relations?

Respondent: Ja, they were fraught, what the conflicts were about personal and political, they would be bursting out about the inequities of the system and whatever it may have, it could have been anything else, I mean they were fairly fraught, you know they weren't, you know I got arrested once on a petty kind of hanging a poster on a tree and breaking

the bylaw, the SB got me and my friend sort of dragged basically for finger printing until it happened, we were then released but of course that hit the press. But my father kind of .., he defended my right to, and so did many of the English farmers, defended my right to have my beliefs even if they disagreed with them kind of approach. So it wasn't like it was ever completely alienated and so forth.

Facilitator: and yourself you were planning to be in unions throughout your life or it was just one sequence after another?

Respondent: no it's a fit of absentmindedness ..(unclear) class position??, if you like, and we know it really is, you know I didn't, when I left .., the unions had only just happened, the 1973 strikes was this big social event that, as a historian one put note of, I had been involved in the wages commission but I had also been involved in education commissions and other stuff on the campus, so it wasn't any .., it was pure, in some ways chance, I was deployed by the Natal Education Department to Glenwood in Durban and Mike Murphey who had been sort of the head of the wages commission had been there the year before, I was actually been put there to take his place because he was moving to the unions and when he saw me, because he knew who I was, he asked me to come and stay with them, share a house with them, him and his wife. Four months into that the SB rolled up at the door and banned his wife, who had been involved in union work in Maritzburg together with that Hempson, Alson Chiddle and those people were banned. And then somewhere along the line, then I, through them I was interacting now with people who were in the unions or on the side of the unions and then this opportunity came I put a labour bulletin. I didn't want to stick with teaching, I mean that was kind of got past my first years examination, I

was now kind of confirmed teacher for the next five years if I wanted to be. But I wasn't .., you know the culture of the school and other things were just unbelievable, it was very much a white school, a rugby school and even though I played rugby and whatever, I didn't think it was the beginning and the end of the world. So ja, I got in there and I've never left, which doesn't mean I haven't thought of leaving. I mean if I leave and I'm not married, if I'd married so many friends who got married and moved on because of pressures of time and money would move them on. The unions don't pay, they paid nothing then. When I finished teaching I think I was earning something like R650 in the Bulletin I started on R130 and then it went to R150 then grew a bit with the inflation, you only survived because you were sharing houses, those kinds of things. Again there was certainly when I nearly resigned from SAMU at the end of the 1980s, that was very close. I was just tired of .., exhausted, one burns out regularly and somehow turns around and comes back. Look I certainly thought of, I was asked to, wouldn't I become a parliamentary researcher at one point, but I didn't really want to leave the unions, I felt I suppose secure in the job and what I was doing, preferred to be here. Ja, I mean on the side, I was so .., obviously participated in a lot of negotiations around local government legislation with people like Eunice Karim and Ravin at an earlier stage.

Now I can only look forward to retirement without a pension, with a very weak pension, that is my current negotiation with my employer because they gave me a promissory note when they first introduced the bench in 1991 because I said what about for some of us, the last 15 years, workers were being very paternalistic, look how good we've been, it was me in the numbers from the other unions, from SAMU who had actually been working other, almost as ..(unclear) for the last 15 years.

Facilitator: And then the race relations within unions, how would you describe them, I'm sure there was a tiny number of white people like yourself within these black led, or black majority unions – were there no tensions around ..(unclear)?

Respondent: I think throughout there were tensions around that question, it's a very difficult question I mean look when I joined the unions and I went into IE??, the kind of state of consciousness is very much one of, I've had this privileged education, I had this opportunity and I must somehow give back to the mass through whatever I can bring as skill. You know certainly for me it wasn't to be a political, I'm not sure about others, I mean people like Johnny Coplin, who is now ..(unclear) capitalist but he was then a very forceful and strategically sound person, maybe push for, but there were always tensions around it. What happened though was that maybe, I don't know, because of the education level, because the black organisers, the employees came out of the ranks of the workers in the factories, out of struggles often and particularly bad tendency where people were being dismissed and you just took them on and they were often ill equipped to deal with the kind of administration or even the questions of organising, well in what I suppose would have been our view that you know you can't just promise the earth, you actually have to be clear about structure, you've got to be clear about the need for forms of organisation even if those are semi-underground, you can't just sort of go there and protolotise and somehow the masses will rise because there's also ..(unclear) the pose and you've got to build force and one got pushed forward, when I moved from .., TWAK was purely co-incidental, I went to this meeting, I was a IE rep or something and the TWAK they were launching this or they were holding their council or whatever. The thing

came up for election, the nomination and two workers nominated me. I only found out later that Junros Nala was the preferred candidate supported by people like Alec and Coplin and whatever, they then caucused me. So when this came up I was kind of flustered and well, I can't say no, they were actually, for whatever reason, it was kind of that way that I got into that seat, then I stuck there. Then again there was a move to ..., because it was about black leadership, and I'm saying it's the white guys to some extent who were pushing it. I got elected out again in 1980, in fact Junros and then somebody else took over in the interim period of Seneke who is now consultant in Natal. At the end of it all I was in absentia elected back because I paid the electricity, water and rates on time and the two really solid standing leadership, they were long time, they were persons with links back to SACTU but actually they just wanted those things to be efficient.

Again when I moved out of FOSATU into Transport and General I was approached by the bus driver leadership because there was a problem, there had been a problem in the union, there had been fraud or corruption and they had exposed it, they had a vacuum, they didn't want to fill it with the only person who was left, so they approached me. I mean it was always the question of black leadership and white intellectual domination. I must read Sekelo's piece again, it's lying here somewhere, you know Sekelo?

Facilitator: I do

Respondent: It's always been there, it's there now, there was this thing, Vincent Rena?? Up there shooting his mouth because our head office is a bunch of old white lefties, most of them. The thing is, that hasn't come,

that's come around because workers have actually .., I fought with them at one point they appointed one person. I said really you've got to have an employment equity plan, they said no we looking for ..(unclear). And there had been many path ups by black intellectuals, not even intellectuals, graduates who .., I don't know, there's know. I don't where it is where people have got opportunity, we just shifted our wage rates at that level up purposely to try and attract .., we need to see an infusion of African intellectuals and we need to attract people. Of course then the other element is still remain there's got to be some kind of commitment and you know political interest and interest in building unions because unions frankly are not in a good state in my view, so whatever we saw made a lot of noise, the kind of structures of how we deal with things, we not kind of dealing with the new world entirely, we are a not a privileged working class but we those who employ, we not dealing with the informal and the unemployed, well enough it's all very well to say ban labour brokers which I fully support, but ja, we not .., we've got a lot of thinking to do about organisational structures and approaches. But we also need an infusion of younger people with a commitment. I don't know where that's coming from, I mean you think of those white intellectuals of then, you know at the time it was always, there was that parallel, I mean but none of this .., with the exception of Drake Koko was it to start a bow, the Black Consciousness side, they didn't really get involved in unions at all. And a number of people are known to the young Christian Movement and that, they kind of copped out, they managed to get the jobs in business even then and that's a problem. So I've no doubt the time may come, maybe it is now when people will go out and wish to organise popular resistance I suppose, that's what we were doing, we organising popular resistance.

Facilitator: In terms of the joining of COSATU, to one big union, was everyone in favour of that move?

Respondent: In FOSATU well it was quite drawn out and you ..(unclear) process throughout, I mean there were points where it had broken down and at the end NACTU never joined, even though they were part, the NACTU unions or whatever they were, they were called a different name then. They stayed out, they had come out of the UTP tradition in Johannesburg which had always been far more assertive of black leadership, and there were various .., I mean UTP in Natal was white intellectuals with a slightly different political ideology. The Durban crowd was the kind of Marxist/Leninist .., looked ..(unclear) more kind of democrats and Christian kind of background. I mean eventually part of those unions broke, Chris Dlamini and Sweet Food and Paper Wood that came across into .., I'm getting confused, they came across into the SACTU earlier on, that was the .., I forget what the names were, Seblatu or something, they joined COSATU, the Unity Talks were as I say very ..(unclear) CTMWA and John Ennison played quite an important role in mediating in those processes. I mean the main fall out was with SAU, SAU tend to lead the charge against various things, white domination of FOSATU, unwillingness to align with the community unionism approach. There all the things that go into merger, a lot of it is sort of ..(unclear) stuff, a lot of it doesn't make sense, if you gonna create a new organisation why can't you leave until the Founding Congress ..(unclear) with these things, a lot of it is nuts and bolts it's more let's sort out the membership statistics and that, who is really representing workers when they come to an event. A lot of the meetings took place here, two of them, they were held in the hall of this place.

Ja there were difficulties but at the end once we got there it went through and then even in the Lodge?? Congress there were debates about who's got to merge with whom and that and obviously SAWA in particular had difficulties because they were a general union, they would be most affected by the split up within COSATU the unions were industrial the only one that wasn't was the one I was with Transport and General, which had sort of other workers and would therefore found itself subject to splitting and then the general workers which used to operate across the road here merged with DMG shortly after COSATU had been launched, as a kind of pre-cursor to them to an actually breaking parts of to go to municipal and so forth.

Facilitator: In the 1990s during the negotiations do you think that the role of unions was central?

Respondent: The national sort of transition?

Facilitator: Ja

Respondent: Look I think the unions played a role at times when there was a need to mobilise a kind of stay away action or that kind of thing, I don't think the ANC had structures on the ground to mobilise mass action and the UDF had also to a considerable extent, been decimated in the late 1980s, because there again, in building I think that there was a weakness in that, I think COSATU was important. I think that march in Bisho, I think was quite a lot of COSATU ..(unclear) some of our people were in the firing line on that day. So those kind of moments, I mean there are lots of areas where COSATU, COSATU was important in a sense of the RDP. The RDP was very much a formulation of COSATU except towards



the end, Trevor Manuel influenced sort of last chapter about micro-economic policy and that you needed to have a micro economic policy. I remember that last COSATU Congress where all of these leadership went off to parliament, you know the Jay Naidoo's, the Alec Irwin's and the Copelin's and whoever else, Chris Dlamini and .., you know there was a rigorous debate about those who opposed any kind of micro-economic policy, because it had been introduced in the latter drafts by greater pressure by Manuel, I think he was head of economic units, these tiffs go on. I mean personally you have to have a micro-economic policy but it didn't have to be GEAR but you've got to have some basis for .., you know the question at that time was you had this immediate past history of hyper inflation in South America and things which from a populist, almost right wing regimes who didn't want .., just wanted to spend without limit.

Facilitator: and then in the post-apartheid South Africa, after 1994, what should have been the role of unions, well the turf changed, during apartheid it was find, but 1994 the ANC government comes into power, and now the people are in power? What should have been the role of unions, or the unions continue from where they left off? The ANC continues to recruit from the unions as well?

Respondent: I don't know, I don't think the unions in broad terms have done anything wrong in a way in the political terrain that they are fighting. I personally have not ever been a particular alliance supporter but I do believe that COSATU is correct to be a political trade union rather than one who says no we are just a trade union and we must only focus on kind of negotiating to improve workers rights, it's nonsense. The union must be political, my different difficulty being somebody who is not inament of the alliance is that is a concern of us just towing lines from the

party particularly, that we not always standing on our own feet independently but you know, having said that, I think in many ways Vavi and whoever have manoeuvred so far to position us where we are. I'm not convinced that unions have dealt adequately with their engagement on the industrial front. I'm not convinced that in our own structures and whatever, to be blunt, there's too much opportunism in leadership, there's a lack of functioning local labour forums, that we've got national agreement, in every municipality there must be a local labour forum where the employer and that was me ..., nothing happens, half these things don't happen, the councillors come and go, the councillors couldn't give a damn about talking to workers. Workers remain in a very adversarial kind of mode in respect to defending their own and defending their own conditions. I'm sceptical of the extent to which, in a really conscious way our leadership is willing to fight for the marginalised. And I mean by that organise to fight for the marginalised, negotiate, not just relying on ban the labour brokers but half our municipalities are employing labour brokers, and what are our local shop stewards and people doing to bring pressure from the bottom, to say ban labour brokers, absorb these workers back into our work force because there's plenty analysis to show that over the last ten years let's say, local government wages have risen appease with inflation and whatever, and a lot of that has gone to the top. But what has happened at the bottom is that you've been shedding labour, there's been outsourcing and casualisation and all the rest. So you know in this recent strike that we had SAMU it was a demand but I will be blunt, it's a demand because me and Bass one of the NOB's at the conference kept harping on this issue and we didn't get a clear response from that leadership that that's a core issue, we were saying we can't only demand minimum wage, we must also demand that posts are filled and ja, the outsourced workers are

brought back on board, inevitably in a strike I guess one gets to the exciting part and you trash the streets there, publicity goes elsewhere and everything is around the money you going to gain which we were very successful despite trashing her policy and on that by the way I mean, I think certainly head office has made every effort long prior, at our conference to say isn't this trashing thing getting a bit actually a bit boring, you do it all the time, it's not necessarily winning you much public support and also questions of strike strategy, the real sense in which since, particularly I suppose maybe it's only mainly for us, but since 1994 the strike has immediately been interpreted as something that we do a march about, so we have a march, we have a protest, we exercise our rights to democratic protest whereas the strike is actually, in kind of fundamental terms, about stopping production, ensuring that there's few workers as possible work. Now if you all go off to town to have a march, you not protecting, you not picketing at your depot gates to persuade people not to strike, so inevitably we not fully in charge. So with those kinds of debates, not sort of principle thing about trashing. I never expected we would persuade some of our rough members at the lower levels not to do things, but ja it's only a best tactic and it could work against you, I think it worked this year just because of the moment and the timing. I think if that strike had gone a week further we would have been in real, in the firing line

Facilitator: When you look back, your involvement in unions as part of your life, so to speak

Respondent: it is

Facilitator: was it worth it or is it worth it?

Respondent: Ja, I don't regret it, obviously at this point in time I would like to know more about my pension, but then everybody wants to know about their pension, I even have university lecturer friends complaining about after 30 years that their pension won't do, but I don't regret it and I certainly see and felt in early 1990s a profound sense of achievement, of having moved from where we were to power, that there had been that transition and then transformation. Of course one had in the 1980s had visions of a complete revolution and a complete break with the past which certainly never came to be and there were hell of a lot of continuities between before and after, whether you like it or not, which perhaps kind of racial democratic .., well the racial democratics of management hasn't changed, ownership kind of partially whatever but there ..(unclear) much more fundamental changes in what the economy is about and I don't know if the new ANC post Polokwane is going to achieve it, I mean we are in this moment of crisis and/or not crisis, I don't know and will it be used as an opportunity to transform what we do, and what the economy is about for that matter. I mean I think we're in worrying times at this point, there are lots of morbid symptoms of things not right, of service delivery that has failed, and I must be clear for the last ten years, something about the culture of power politics, the culture of leadership contestation and stuff has been, I'm not talking about at the top, I'm talking about down there, we've had these endless fishers and I'm .., splits in provinces and things which are about .., I don't know what, you know in it, it is just people positioning themselves. I mean sometimes it's linked to them also positioning themselves within ANC branches and party branches, and this is just seen as just another seat in which you can influence your position there, I don't know but there's real, have been real senses at which office ..(unclear) spend their lives fire fighting, going down

to try and resolve or mediate in conflicts over stuff that really actually often lack substance. It will be somebody grabs the constitution and seeks just to interpret the constitution to support their camp, when you look at it it's really opportunistic, you know anybody can take one line and not look at the whole body of the thing and interpret it, so that is not very .., and we still in it. You know we having a congress in two weeks time, who knows who's coming in and then there's these kind of .., there are all sorts of questions, like there's pressure for head office to be relocated to Jo'burg, we have a satellite office and I even supported that two offices – I was the major creator of it in the early days because I felt Cape Town, I was coming out of KZN and I felt that Cape Town was wanting to hold on to too much and we needed to diversify, because in the modern world I don't believe you need that one big place where all the head office is, if the people who are doing the work are doing the work, it doesn't help to discipline a person because they're next door, anymore than if they don't do the work you give them the autonomy to get on with the work and if they are not delivering you say what is expected and finally then maybe you've got to discipline but .., it doesn't depend on centralisation, but I do think the unions sort of slipped up in always filling posts, more posts, in the Jo'burg side of things then yes, people are pushing and I don't it's wrong, it's like the employment equity thing. I actually drafted one ten years ago and my ..(unclear) didn't bother to pursue the question.

Facilitator: Is there anything we didn't talk about which you think is important for this interview?

Respondent: there will always be a lot that I forgot, I can't think of anything in the short term, I think the questions you asked are important ones. I mean ja.

**END**

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