

Jake Masela

Facilitator: This is an interview with Jake Masela we are in Mamelodi, Pretoria the date is 12 November 2010, interview is done by Brown Maaba. You can speak any language. Can you please give me a background of where you were born and how you were raised and so on and you ended up in union issues?

Respondent: Right I was in 1959 here in Pretoria, raised in Pretoria and I went to school, primary just in Mamelodi, Tshimollo and then I went to higher primary, Gamelodi from higher primary I went to high school Technical High school and from Technical I went to work due to financial constraints. I first worked at Siemens, I worked there for three years if I'm not mistaken, in 1980 I joined Grintek, today it is called Sub-Grintek because it merged with another company, at the time it was called Grinel and today it is called Sub-Grintek situated in Centurion. Presently my position is Supervisor. When I was with Grintek in the 1980s, this is where we realised the importance of joining unions because by then employers could fire a person at any given time as long as they feel they could fire you without having to go through the necessary steps like today. Issues of labour as they are seen today, these are weapons for employees but at the time they were not so powerful because the employer could fire you at any time. This is when I met Raymond Khoza, he is in fact a former member of the union. We followed it up and the union grew. The union at the time was called Metal Industrial whatever by then, there were smaller unions one union was formed, because of Raymond's idea, it was then called MEWUSA, it was Raymond's idea – this after the unions merged that was the name given.

We carried on with the union, organised workers in different companies. It was difficult at the time to organise people to join the union, remember it was during the apartheid era and now people were afraid to join unions because they didn't want to be intimidated, they can be caught at any time, those type of things. It was difficult but we carried on, that was the best way for any worker to survive, unity was a must at that time.

I remember Workers Day (1 May) and 21 March, we would hold seminars, we were not allowed to wear t-shirts openly, we would hide the t-shirts and only wear them at meetings. Union members were identified by the t-shirts, the era did not allow a black person to wear union t-shirts because you could easily be arrested. We went on underground – unions were not recognised even though they existed. We had difficulty convincing companies to recognise unions, although they knew the unions existed but to get it to be recognised was difficult. The employers were supporting the state in a way because this gave them power over the workers. We went on that way, it was fine. I remember in 1994 when Mandela was released, unions were beginning to be recognised officially. This is when people started to act freely. Unions were registered and employers did not have the powers to stop us from registering unions, to date there are companies that act as if they allow unions whilst they know that their workers are threatened underground, they still do it.

Management will always say we do not have a problem with unions, in fact they will tell you that you have to have 50 plus 1 means you have the majority, so they always look at that, if you are not 50 plus 1 – in return they will threaten people so that they do not join unions even though unions are recognised. They cannot back track because it is there.

Facilitator: Just to go back a bit, when you were growing up here in Mamelodi, the 1960s and the 1970s, I'm sure the political situation was linked with the working environment. How was the situation like?

Respondent: The situation was bad. I remember around 1976 when the uprisings started in Johannesburg, it was around the 21st when they started in Mamelodi it was around the 23rd. What happened in Johannesburg was worse than what happened in Jo'burg. This is how things were in Mamelodi. It was kayos, bottle stores were owned by councillors by then, they were vandalised, together with the bar lounges. A lot of people went to jail because of that. If a friend of mine is arrested you would also be arrested, they didn't care whether you were there or not, they assumed that you will not vandalise alone, we would all be arrested. Fortunately I was never arrested for looting. What happened is when I joined the union, when the time for political holidays came, for instance I am referring to June 16, Workers Day etc. If you were leading in the union movement you would be locked up until after the holiday so that you do not get the opportunity to disrupt – you would be locked up without any charge. They didn't want us to politicise other people, that was their strategy. Well it was just like that, you would meet a lot of people from different organisations, we would just sleep there like in the compounds.

Facilitator: Were the people who doubled up as unionists and political activists?

Respondent: Yes it was like that with most people, in order to become a trade unionist you must be politicised, for instance we were from the 1976 uprisings, some people skipped the country, others remained, automatically you are already politicised, you are aware of what his

happening in the country and when it comes to union issues it was just a brush up, you belong there in order for you to be safe, it is then easier for you to talk to the people and politicise them about union activities knowing that you are from a political background. That made it easier

Facilitator: How was the union introduced in your factory?

Respondent: It was difficult, we struggled. The majority of workers at Grintek were coloured people. I remember when I started working there we were about 21 black people. They believed it is their company because they were in the majority, the HR person was a coloured person who really made us feel that he is doing us a favour by employing. I think they were testing with us. We proceeded, I realised later on that apparently they were doing some sort of research, comparing blacks and coloured. The organisation realised that the 21 blacks employed remained with the organisation but when it comes to the coloured folk, they were in and out of the job. I am not sure why they decided to test with black people, they checked and realised that it is in their benefit to employ black people. Originally the majority was coloured people.

Facilitator: when did the coloureds begin to disappear in the system?

Respondent: they are still there, otherwise it was a big company. We were about 4000 to 5000 employees at the time, we have now shrunk to a total number of 200 and something.

Facilitator: from 4000 that's a lot.

Respondent: that is how bad the shrinkage was.

Facilitator: that is not good.

Respondent: We don't know where the other people are at this point in time.

Facilitator: So when the unions were introduced, how were they received, did you have coloured, blacks and also did the blacks divide themselves about this issue?

Respondent: when the unions were introduced originally it was only blacks, remember we were from the era of first class, second class and third class citizens. First class citizens was whites, second class citizens were coloured and third class we were talking of blacks. When the union was introduced a lot of people there were blacks introducing the unions. We couldn't just do it alone as blacks knowing that we have this rainbow nation, because in Grintek/Siemens we had coloured people there, we had to find a way so that they can belong. This was difficult, what the government would do is take the coloureds for military training compulsory, they had no say in the matter. I think this is how they brainwashed them, because the minute we talked about unionism they would tell us that they are not interested neither in union issues or politics. They had no interest what so ever. What would happen is they would say they don't want to join the unions because the government would show them video footage on terrorism, they were brainwashed that the terrorist will kill all whites, blacks, whatever. I think that is how they brainwashed, in my mind I could not believe that how does one skip the country and come back a terrorist, you left the country to fight for your country how can you suddenly become a terrorist. So the coloured people believed

that the people who skipped were terrorist. Then this made it very difficult for us to get them to join unions because they were brain washed.

As time went on, I remember this guy from Ga-Rankuwa, Kaizer Makapane who passed away, together with Raymond. What happened is we made it our duty, Kaizer was working at Siemens, I worked at Grintek. We were asked to find a way to recruit these guys no matter how difficult, we had to find a way to get them in. We found a way, but it was a difficult task to organise those guys. If you are given instructions you had to find a way to get them to understand. We went there and discussed worker issues, no politics. We then looked at the environment of the company, employer/employee relations, we are only going to deal with that only. That is how we managed to get them in, with no politics involved. At the same time you had to protect yourself because alone you cannot fight employers if you are fired unfairly. But if we are together under the umbrella of a union, there are lawyers who can fight for you. That is how we managed to get them steadily in, when you talk about politics you must tell them about something that appeared in the newspaper, "I read something in the newspaper" even though it was political. Slowly you will their big eyes opening, they didn't want to hear anything about politics. That is how we dealt with them. Slowly we managed them to join the union. You had to be careful, look for someone they are likely to follow and believe in and befriend this person. Those type of people were then given positions like shop steward so that they can convince the others. From there they will slowly come in. When it comes to meeting we could not invite them to the township, we went to their locations.

Facilitator: so was this effective in the end?

Respondent: very much so.

Facilitator: what about victimisation at work, you said that white people were not happy with the unions in the beginning. Were there no victimisation, people fired and so on?

Respondent: yes those type of things happened, if they realised that you are powerful those were the characteristics they would use, they would sometimes offer you a position which does not allow you to be a member of the union. Other people would refuse positions if the positions were not allowing them to join union, that is the tact the employers used to get rid of you.

Facilitator: This union was formed, MEWUSA which was formed in the 1980s, mid 1980s?

Respondent: yes mid 1980s

Facilitator: but at that time there was FOSATU and then it became COSATU, was it affiliated under FOSATU?

Respondent: No there are two umbrella bodies, there was NACTU, MEWUSA affiliated to NACTU, and the other one was COSATU, there were the two umbrellas by then. Under MEWUSA if you were belonging to different organisations than COSATU unions because the minute you are under COSATU union automatically you were ANC. You must know that by then people were belonging to different organisations. Now the minute you start a union and do not allow people to belong to different

unions then it would be difficult for you, otherwise then you must belong to NACTU. In our union there were people from the Black Consciousness Movement, AZAPO, PAC etc., those were the people, generally when you organise you just organise a worker irrespective of their political affiliation. You just want a member that is why at the end of the day it was allowed. This posed a problem at the end of the day. We used to say when we're together we don't talk politics, and that people are allowed to belong to a political organisation of their choice. When we are in the union we had to think as one, automatically there would be some clicks here and there and there were clicks. That is why you will notice that lately, when it comes to NACTU and COSATU, COSATU is still strong

Facilitator: when you say there were clicks, what was the agenda of these many clicks?

Respondent: You belong to a political organisation that I do not want you become a friend, when I talk of clicks, we must talk politics, there is no way we can sit and not discuss politics. And even if ..., when it comes to leadership, to come and vote for leadership, because of clicks, we sit together and check who is who and then whatever, the clicks will then decide on who to pick to lead them. In most times I remember Raymond who was our president, we asked him which political organisation he belonged to, he would not tell you because he knew that people belonged to different political organisations, the minute you belong to one you see a split automatically. No one was on a fence and not belong to any political organisation being a unionist. He was hiding that to secure the union part of it, but he had to belong to some political organisation.

Facilitator: it seems to me that NACTU was BCM oriented, the streams that you're talking about, AZAPU, PAC and all that?

Respondent: yes BCM

Facilitator: was it openly so?

Respondent: no we were discussing union matters but you knew who the people were, unlike with COSATU it is straight ANC members and they were able to talk freely, even to date they have affiliated to this and that but they are strictly ANC. Even today when it comes to NACTU it is still BCM oriented, I just don't have the facts because I am no longer as active as before.

Facilitator: what about the workers, I'm talking about people on the floor. You guys are in the BCM stream, the majority of the workers did they understand that there's a BCM stream, there's a non racial stream?

Respondent: those that understood politics would understand exactly what is happening. It was not all of them because our intention was to make the union stronger with no politics attached because the reason again, that is why Grintek/Siemens we had a lot of coloured guys. If you introduced politics there you would lose members within a second. That is now we talked of worker issues, and that is how you could get them right because they would say if there are politics involved we will not belong to any union. We could see the danger of losing members.

Facilitator: did you have whites in the unions, this could be a deliberate question, perhaps there was none?

Respondent: truly speaking none.

Facilitator: so you had, blacks, coloureds and maybe Indians.

Respondent: yes

Facilitator: how grounded were these other people who were into NACTU politics, in terms of politics, especially the Indians and coloureds, in terms of BC politics?

Respondent: Truly speaking, when we were at conferences, meetings whatever, politics were not discussed at all. But if maybe we went to a seminar and then we are going to spend the night, this is when we would start.

Facilitator: what about problems in the township, township politics, AZAPO/ANC fights of the 1980s, did this spill over into the unions?

Respondent: when it comes to Pretoria, let me talk of Pretoria we did not have that much of a problem, even today, I will tell you that we don't have a problem of that sort. People who belonged to different organisations, sport for instance clubs etc., they can still be together and argue over it when it comes to Pretoria, the best talker would win and it would end there without any fight. What happened in Johannesburg at the time, if you belonged to a certain political organisation a fight would erupt, we did not have those type of fights here in Pretoria, for instance Ikatha vs ANC for instance here in Pretoria. It almost happened at the hostels, within a second the majority of the township dwellers were in the

hostel and stopped this from happening. It has never happened in Pretoria.

Facilitator: You mentioned that COSATU was strong, does it mean that NACTU was weak?

Respondent: Strong in this way, strong in terms of the followers, at the time everybody knew about Mandela, an intellectual would know differently about AZAPO leaders or other political organisations. Children as young as sub A knew about Mandela, our grandmothers, fathers and mothers, the illiterate knew Mandela. The ANC had it so easy because of Mandela, everybody was the talk of the town, when Mandela went to jail some did not know him, then everything started evolving about Mandela, strictly Mandela, even if you have not heard about Mandela, you would want to know who is this Mandela. In the process then you will get to know about the ANC. This made it easy for people to flock to the ANC. When it comes to BCM, to get people to understand it was difficult, there were few intellectuals because all you want is the majority of the people in order for you to win, it had to be people who understood politics. That is why I was talking about the weakness, the majority of people were in the ANC because they knew about Mandela already, even little children, and obviously Mandela belonging to ANC, when it comes to other political parties you must start teaching. That is the difference.

Facilitator: In terms of funding, did you have enough funds to sustain the union?

Respondent: yes we were getting international donors to fund us. When people were going overseas, people belonging to NACTU and then

belonging to ANC umbrellas would go together. When it came to funding, funds were available at the time.

Facilitator: the floor issues, in terms of workers on the ground, were the shop stewards very strong, where would you put them?

Respondent: when it comes to that we were strong. When I talk about weakness or whatever, let me tell you what has happened. COSATU unions, NACTU unions, they were there. There was a time when we had discussions, I am now talking about pre-1994, when we were talking about one country, one federation, at the time we had two federations. Before that, Raymond Khoza, we went to COSATU unions and had meetings with them, lengthy meetings with them to create one big union and one big mother body. I was involved in the meetings, unfortunately this did not materialise because there was a suggestion that politics should not be part of union matters, worker problems and we stick to that no politics. Individuals could belong to any political organisation, no union should be under government structures, unions must be on its own. Those were the points discussed in order to formulate one big union and one umbrella body. We went on, this did not happen because a lot of them were beginning to form the alliance with the ANC, an alliance, they were not fair during the discussions regarding the alliance. The discussions were encouraging that there should be no politics involved only the worker movement, individuals can belong to politics, this made it difficult for them, we had no problem, we wanted to concentrate on worker problems not political issues. That is why it did not materialise in the end. I remember I was on the African Desk. South Africa was the last black country when it comes to negotiations. When I belonged to the African desk, it was with the intension of what has happened, how did we

negotiate, what should happen in our country for us not to make the same mistakes as other African countries. That is how we learnt, therefore when we returned the message was negotiation was the best nation to get this country right. That is why South Africa took that route.

Facilitator: in the 1980s from MEWUSA what were the burning issues in terms of worker and employee relationship?

Respondent: the burning issue, I'm talking of wage gaps, it started a long time ago and it was there. That was the main issue because again what has happened is, we talk of NIC, coloureds, Indians etc., NIC (Natives, Indians and Coloureds) so most people in the three categories belonged to the NIC, automatically it means there's a difference between whites and this group. NIC means weekly paid employees. When it comes to weekly paid employees and staff employees there's different packages and this benefited the employer. Those were the things that we were fighting for, and then the gap again.

Facilitator: but salary issues were they ever resolved in that period?

Respondent: even now they are not yet resolved, we are still fighting for the wage gap.

Facilitator: Issues of exploitation, how did the union deal with those things unless there was no exploitation at work?

Respondent: there was. Let me tell you it was difficult. There was exploitation and if you discussed it with them they were so good to explain that it is not exploitation. Those were the things that we were

trying to tell them and highlight to them, those were the main factors, those were the major issues we were fighting for. Even if we .., you are now saying there's that exploitation, oppression, they will explain it to the best of their knowledge – we had a lot of hearings when it comes to that but they protected each other. You had to have some form of proof when you say somebody is oppressing you, which was very difficult. They would find a way to protect each other at whatever cost, even today. As long as you've got grounds to prove what you're saying.

Facilitator: the former exploitation that was known generally in your industry, what kind was it?

Respondent: They will .., you will for instance do a certain job and not be paid accordingly, mostly that is what would happen. What would happen is, let me say you have the position and you are paid little, then they employ a white person, the white person would earn more than you. If you ask why .., whether the white person had relevant documents or not, if we wanted prove that they have the same qualifications or not they would not allow it. They would say that the information is confidential, that the information is not there for us. We could not check whether we are exploited or not, we had no facts because this would be hidden from us. Without the information you could not measure that.

Facilitator: did you employ women at the workplace?

Respondent: yes there were

Facilitator: the are issues like pregnancy and so on, how did you deal with that?

Respondent: let me tell you what happened by then. When women were pregnant they were forced to resign, even today some of them will tell you that they have a broken service. If you are pregnant you had to resign and then re-apply from afresh unlike today. On your return you go on maternity leave and come back with no broken service.

Facilitator: did the unions not take that up?

Respondent: We fought for that, I think we got it right in the early 1990s, all along it was difficult. Like the 40 hour week, it was 45 hour a week, we fought that after five years, we had long worked 45 hour week.

Facilitator: you never had night shifts?

Respondent: we worked night shifts if there was a lot of work

Facilitator: how did that affect women and so on?

Respondent: when we started at that company, when it comes to women they would work until late, 12 o'clock, there was no difference, whether married or single, they will sign or resign that is why the unions were introduced. They would inform you just before you knock off that you are working overtime, with a list of names, sign or resign. If you don't sign otherwise then you must know that your job is finished. You couldn't do anything at the time you just had to sign. They didn't care about your problems, whether you are married or not, that is how people were treated, as slaves in the work place.

Facilitator: did you manage to overcome that one?

Respondent: yes but in a long run, that overtime should not be compulsory, a person should decide whether they want to work overtime or not.

Facilitator: what about racism issues, South Africa was something else in the 1970s and 1980s and even in the 1990s. How was it dealt with?

Respondent: racism is still there to date, subtle, you won't see it. By then it was there, blacks, whites etc., there were black and white canteens at the time, even toilets there were different toilets. We fought for that again. We now use the same toilets those things were there.

Facilitator: but in terms of the 1990s and beyond the 1990s, the worker problems were they the same as in the 1980s or has it changed?

Respondent: no they've changed

Facilitator: what kind of challenges were there for the 1990s, 1990 Mandela comes out of prison, I'm sure the place began to shake a bit?

Respondent: they did shake a bit, after Mandela took over, most of the things we fought for .., they had to start changing, I don't think they believed that a black person can run this country, they had that in their mind and then after this it was a surprise to them. They had no option but to change

Facilitator: practically speaking, what were the physical changes for the 1990s, the things that you actually saw as an organiser or a unionist?

Respondent: for example, the 40 hour week was approved then, segregation in terms of using the same canteens and toilets, things changed – some companies to date still have not transformed, in terms of employing black managers, we still have that problem and we are still fighting that even today, we do have black manager, not managers, compared to this BEE it does not par, things are not there yet. They will tell you that blacks are job hoppers. They are not job hoppers, they have no respect for you if you are there, they can annoy you that is why you will leave and then tomorrow they will say you can see he doesn't last, how do you last when they don't respect you and your position. They can annoy you. They still don't believe in black people even today, they pretend as if everything is fine. We will get there and they are going nowhere this is our country, we must take our time.

Facilitator: I think you talked about the negotiations, I don't know whether you were referring to the negotiations of the 1990s, when you said NACTU participated in the negotiations?

Respondent: NACTU/MEWUSA we participated in wage negotiations

Facilitator: did that work well?

Respondent: It did

Facilitator: any regrets?

Respondent: no regrets, it worked out easier because we were together, when we accepted an offer we were together and were able to caucus together. When we said no it was no on both sides, when we go to strike we would support each other and strike together

Facilitator: In the 1980s were there too many strikes, too little strikes, no strikes or it depended?

Respondent: Not just a strike, what would happen then, in most cases it was wage strikes, most of the strikes would happen in July, the increases were supposed to be implemented in July, so the negotiations would start around April/May, if there is no agreement in July the strikes would begin.

Facilitator: Your perception of shop stewards as far as you know were they effective, less effective or not effective?

Respondent: effective, without them the companies would have exploited us

Facilitator: can you just maybe expand on that?

Respondent: As a shop steward, I would say they were effective in this way. The minute you are a shop steward you know you have your followers, you act boldly and move boldly – the workers trusted their shop steward they even said that their shop stewards are powerful. The shop steward is not powerful the workers are powerful because they are supporting you. So you have to make them proud. So employers were scared of the shop stewards, if they touched a wrong button, we sit and

we discuss and if they don't agree or accept their wrongs we will strike at any time. Now this was a threat to them, that is why the key was powerful

Facilitator: You also mentioned that the firm went from 4000 to 200 or 300, what happened over time?

Respondent: During the negotiations, these guys were saying that they want to have smaller companies and that they want to create jobs etc., the employers. When we talk of employers, let me say I am going to start my own company, a small company, this was a strategy to make unions weaker. They opened smaller companies and then at the same time they would get contracts from the same company. You had to have a certain number of people in order to have a union operating in your company. For instance let me say I have 5 or 10 I will tell them I don't need a union, but during the negotiations they said they wanted to create jobs. They were then given the latitude to expand to the smaller companies, this is what they did. So that is why the bigger company started sub-contracting the smaller companies, so obviously the numbers reduced from 4000 to this 200 and something today. I think it was their strategy to weaken the unions because the minute you touched a wrong button a strike could erupt at any time, automatically this would affect them. I think that was their strategy.

Facilitator: so at the moment how does the union look like because there's about 200/300 of you?

Respondent: My brother let me say to you, a lot of things have changed, we do not have the problems that we had in the past, unions are accepted, there isn't a lot of strikes, unions are officially there. I don't

think even worker leadership, the employers have to acknowledge unions and they must just take the right path. There isn't a lot of strikes because they've acquainted themselves to unions. They know about the unions.

Facilitator: when you look back which were the outstanding leaders at MEWUSA?

Respondent: Powerful leaders were those that were in politics, they were just hiding behind the union, they had knowledge of what is happening in the country. Most of the shop stewards they were intellectuals, it was not so difficult.

Facilitator: the major achievements when you look back at unions?

Respondent: We have achieved a lot compared to the early 1980s and now, there are a lot of changes in the work place, but still there must still be other changes. Companies recognise unions, but when we talk of the wage gap nothing happens, we've been fighting for wage gaps to date, this is a monster we will fight I don't know until when. We will fight.

Facilitator: When you look back, what were the weaknesses of the unions?

Respondent: I don't see a lot of weaknesses, at the time the unions were so powerful, because of apartheid this strengthened the unions, the union was a hiding place for us in order for you to promote politics that will eventually changed the country, that is why we flocked to the unions, that is why we were so strong.

Facilitator: are there things which you think could have been done differently?

Respondent: I cannot think of any, when we were in the union movement, nobody was doing things on their own, we were together jointly and we were saying this is the route to go and we went for it, most of the things we managed to get right. I cannot fault anything.

Facilitator: When did you stop being involved in union issues?

Respondent: I was never given a position, what is happening presently, I belong to some BEE committee, we are now fighting for .., I want to see black people in management positions and the wage gap to be dealt with.

Facilitator: which positions did you hold over time in the 1980s?

Respondent: I was vice-president

Facilitator: and the challenges that came with that?

Respondent: there were a lot of challenges. Let me tell you about the in house challenges, as long as you are there for the workers there's nothing you can do, you have to accept them. The main thing was not to promote politics in the union movement, that was the best way to handle it.

Facilitator: union issues did it affect the family in some way?

Respondent: Yes they do but I had something in my mind, I used to fight with my wife, what happens is, I would have a meeting outside every week, and then after a month I would be away from home, this would also affect my salary, we would find. I have three kids, I had this thing, that I am representing a million people and I have three a home, that was my consolation. I don't know whether I was right or wrong, and I felt that if she feels like leaving me because of union issues, I was waiting for it, I was there to serve a lot of people, one million I will be able to get a wife out of that. My worry was not a woman or family per se, it was the South African situation, I did not like this apartheid – why worry about the family whereas there's a monster in front of you. That gave me the courage to go on. Money wise we were paid 10 days in a year, as vice president you would exceed the 10 days, then it means you are not going to be paid for the days, they would say the union must pay. When it comes to wages, weekly, automatically is half wage, then the salaried staff, but there was nothing wrong, I was fighting for an issue which I can see today. We were doing this for them.

Facilitator: any regrets for being involved in union structures?

Respondent: I have no regrets I'm happy, I can still proceed. I am happy because I learnt a lot of things, I know a lot of things, in fact what I learnt from the unions I can accept. At the time I was so short tempered, but now the education I had made me different.

Facilitator: Is there anything that you think is important which should have been part of this interview?

Respondent: no

Facilitator: any closing word maybe?

Respondent: thanks for being here and am happy to have led people, today I'm still happy and I will still lead them, I would like to see this country changed for the better and to see a black man in a better position at company level.

Facilitator: thanks for your time

END

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