

Bonnie Tebello

Facilitator: This is an interview with Bonnie Tebello, we are in Welkom, the date is 24 September 2011 interview is done by Brown Maaba. Thanks very much for your time. You can speak in any language you're comfortable with. Just give a background as to where you were born, your family background and so on and how you ended up in union structures?

Respondent: I was born here in Welkom in 1985, I was schooled here, I did everything here in Welkom. I started working in 2006 and joined the union in 2007, SACAWU, I became a shop steward for the first term, 2007/8/9 and then I was re-elected when the term came to an end. I am still a shop steward. I am also an LEC Member in the local structure, Local Executive Committee.

Facilitator: so your schooling, did you complete your Matric?

Respondent: Yes I completed my Matric

Facilitator: why not university, why suddenly look for a job instead of looking for a university placement?

Respondent: My Matric results were not so good, I did not meet the criteria for university. Otherwise I studied through college, I did a computer course whilst working, also I had to start looking after myself, my mother passed away and my great grandmother became the breadwinner, she also passed away 2005, so I had to find my own balance.

Facilitator: so that's why you had to look for a job

Respondent: Yes

Facilitator: what kind of a job were you looking for exactly?

Respondent: I wanted to be a policeman, but I realised the challenges, you had to have a drivers licence so the only job I was able to get was in the retailing industry. I did not have an interest in pursuing a drivers licence at the time. Nowadays one has to survive, you take any job that comes, it is no longer about your dreams, should you reach a certain stage you are forced to work after school. It's a battle of the fittest, you have to find something that can sustain you so that you can survive, as time goes you can try to pursue some of your goals as they come.

Facilitator: which firm did you end up with?

Respondent: Shoprite Checkers

Facilitator: how did you get the job?

Respondent: Well at the time, in 2006 my brother worked part time in management, he told me that people are likely to go on strike so there might be a job opportunity. That is how I got the job. I got the job, worked for three months, the strike ended after three months, they retained me because of my performance. I was told I can

stay behind, that is when I was asked to submit my CV and went through the processes. That is how I got the job.

Facilitator: the kind of industries here in Welkom what are they? Mining etc.?

Respondent: the job opportunities here apart from the mining industry, there's a lot of retailers. Most firms are subcontracted to the mines – they use a lot of labour brokers, Alpha Kruil etc. but all in all here in town the retail industry is quite big, it employs a lot of people.

Facilitator: In general are there job opportunities here in Welkom?

Respondent: it is not easy to get a job here in Welkom hence I wanted to become a policeman. I remember I spoke to one of the SAP guys to advise me how to get a job. I was advised to go elsewhere like Smalltown, they told me that is the only way I can get into the police force and ask for a transfer so that I can work close to home. Applying from Welkom was apparently a hassle.

Facilitator: did you believe them?

Respondent: Yes I did, most of the people working here are not from Welkom, not just SAPS, for example the municipality, most of the people are not from here

Facilitator: do you think that impacted negatively on people's psych or thinking or perceptions regarding outsiders?

Respondent: yes things are bad for people from Welkom, the people from Lethabong, Welkom are reserved, they are not the type to toyi toyi and all that, but you can see and feel that people are generally angry with the situation.

Facilitator: So the kind of union you have at Shoprite, which one is it exactly, the name?

Respondent: SACAWU, we also have merchandisers, companies like Clover, they have their own, Dairy Belle, Supply Chain etc. So all these people from Nestle etc., they have their own union FAWU, we also have the union for cleaners, Mr Clean company is affiliated under SATAWU. Security companies also fall under SATAWU.

Facilitator: how strong is the union here, SACAWU in particular?

Respondent: SACAWU is very strong, if you look at their membership, generally, nationally, they have a lot of members, they are quite powerful. So what happens is Shoprite has what is called Company Counsel, we have people from Shoprite who bargain and negotiate directly with management or Shoprite CEO. This is where we are having problems. The majority in the retail industry is coloured people, sometimes they have no need for a union, we are having difficulty recruiting them. Some have joined, this is our only challenge. The union is okay so far.

Facilitator: why do coloureds not see the importance of affiliating to unions?

Respondent: Well I wouldn't know, but my view, after speaking to them, they are worried about paying subscriptions, the amount is too little, I think they want to receive their money as it, they do not believe in deductions on their salaries, they also do not understand how the deductions work, for instance they do not understand what we mean when we talk about provident fund. We explained to some but others do not have an understanding, in some cases they don't even understand what UIF is, they thought it was the subscriptions, so I had to explain to them that UIF goes to the Department of Labour, some understand others are not even interested, they have their own views about unions. They are very spontaneous, if they decide to leave today they just leave. I once lived in Bornville where the majority lives, in the past the area was reserved for coloureds only. I used to live there, they generally have very bad habits, drinking, smoking etc., working they work because they are whiling away time. They do not understand formality and to follow rules, they find it too much for them. The statistics we have show that very few of them actually go and look for work and the very same minority leaves work at the same rate. Africans, blacks work for a longer period

Facilitator: why are they so unstable at work?

Respondent: I don't know really, but the few that I have seen left work due to drinking too much, perhaps some research must be done regarding their instability in terms of work

Facilitator: when did you join the union?

Respondent: 2007

Facilitator: who introduced you to the unions?

Respondent: Well, I think before I joined the company, and before my brother became a manager, he was just an ordinary employee and then he became the bakery controller, that is when he joined the union, at the time I was still at school. He is the one who told me that the first thing I must do is to join the union, he then taught me about unions. For example he told me about the challenges, that some people will tell me that they've worked for the company for a long time and have never joined a union and they are still employed. Joining the union is not about being arrested at work and you need representation or you need to be represented in a DC, there are a lot of unfair labour practices which must be addressed, you will need someone to represent you and advise you regarding work issues. That is when I joined the union and selected as a shop steward. Thereafter I attended union workshops, I travelled a lot. Although in politics we learn everyday.

Facilitator: what kind of workshops did you attend, what exactly?

Respondent: The first workshop was held here in our SACAWU local office. It was about handling cases, how to become a shop steward, some labour laws, information regarding CCMA, we learnt about why people go to CCMA and what happens there, they also highlighted to us about arbitration, they also taught us the constitution of the union. The workshops I attended outside the local office were in conjunction with COSATU, there's a course we attend called Chris Hani Brigade which is held in Bloemfontein. On 29 July 2011 we went to Bloemfontein to attend a Young Workers Conference which was organised by COSATU. The purpose of the workshop was to engage young workers, we were encouraged to educate young workers about the importance of joining the union movement. The older generation were mostly uninterested. We have what is called Vibrant Media – several ways of communication, for instance, Facebook, Twitter etc., if you want to involve young people communicate with them through such communication channels.

Facilitator: are the workshops effective?

Respondent: very effective, we have learnt a lot and have a different view on issues, we see things differently now because we are now aware of what is happening in our surroundings. Some of the workshops also teach us how the economy affect us, they teach us the importance of unions. The last workshop we attended at Chris Hani's Brigade told us to start listening to SA FM because you will learn a lot about what is going on in your surroundings, as opposed to listening to 5 FM which focuses more on music. We are also encouraged to share the knowledge we have with our locals. Shop Steward councils are held once a month at our office with the some of our leadership, there's a unit that also deals with education. After the meeting we ask some of the leadership to remain behind and share our ideas with them. This is very effective.

Facilitator: when were you elected as a shop steward?

Respondent: 2007

Facilitator: why you, you were new and young why you? How did it happen?

Respondent: They had about four shop stewards when I joined, I did not like what was going on. For instance we only had one shop steward representing the whole shop, my concern was what would happen should this particular person not be there what would happen, you will find management starting to enforce some of the heavy laws, unfair labour practices became apparent when this person was away because. Of course some shop stewards were lacking, management would find a loophole in them and capitalise on it. If the shop steward is away the employer would use the opportunity to suspend workers. That is why I accepted to

be elected as a shop steward. In the last elections I was also elected as the co-ordinator for all shop stewards in our shop.

Facilitator: what are the challenges of being a shop steward?

Respondent: There's a lot, some may not be challenges, I had to start doing things differently. For instance, I can't be late for work because I have to lead by example, I must always be wearing my uniform. You must also understand what is happening around you, understand the process because management will continuously test you. Some employers can easily suspend you if you are no longer a shop steward and do not understand the processes. These are the challenges, I must always be on guard, be careful what I do, say etc. I have to lead by example for the workers.

Facilitator: the kind of problems of the workers, what type of problems do you attend to?

Respondent: Shop floor issues are everyday problems, you solve it today and again it reappears, you then have to be more like a watchdog so that things don't keep happening. And employee wants to go on lunch and this is their right to go to lunch, they are eligible for lunch every 5 hours. Sometimes the employer wants to force them to take 30 minute lunch, this was not negotiated timeously and is being imposed on the employer. So the employer will come to me and complain, sometimes it has to do with leave, for instance the employer will not allow a lot of people to go on leave at this point in time, for instance we cannot take December leave. Some would complain that they have not been on leave since the beginning of the year. I then have to sit and negotiate with the employer about the worker rights, also I have to explain the processes and regulations to the worker so that they understand. The workers do have an interest in union. When we have general meetings they are very supportive, when we have rallies they are also supportive. I

remember the last rally we went to in on 1 May, there's 100% membership at Shoprite Thabong. The shop was closed to support the COSATU Initiative of Workers Day.

Facilitator: do you think that some of the issues you are dealing with today are much better compared to .., of course you were young before 1994, that they are much better before 1994 when you listen to what other people are saying?

Respondent: yes what I have heard is that there was a lot of abuse by the employer, a person was fired for nothing, workers had no rights and they were not recognised. When it comes to employing senior staff in top management positions, preference was given to white people, black people were considered last. Things have changed now, we all do the same kind of jobs, if a white person expects not to work like us they are expected to leave on their own. We have white people who affiliated to SACAWU, we see them in our staff meetings, they have an interest in union matters.

Facilitator: how did that happen that you were able to attract whites not coloureds in the union?

Respondent: I think white people understand the purpose of having a union, in as far as provident fund is concerned. White people like to invest, they want to know what is happening especially if it is going to benefit them at the end of the day. White people also do their work, if they are given a task they do it, they don't run to shop stewards except if there's a real problem. White people prefer to play it safe because there has been too many retrenchments across the country. SACAWU negotiated with our employer that should one shop be closed, retrenchment should not be the first option. In 2005 a Checkers outlet next to the Casino was closed

down. Nobody was retrenched but what they did was the staff retrenched was sent to other shops. That is one of the achievements of the union.

Facilitator: so retrenchment will not affect you?

Respondent: There is no retrenchment in as far as I know about Checkers

Facilitator: In this area or across?

Respondent: I think across because Checkers is chain of stores

Facilitator: In terms of the wages would you say you are getting a living wage?

Respondent: No that is one of the burning issues we want addressed. On 5 October we will be joining COSATU in their initiative to fight for a living wage because the salaries paid do not match the ordinary life of today. The living wage of COSATU also includes health care, we are supposed to have medical aid cover. We do not have that currently, so that is one of the burning issues. The other issue is labour related, you will remember that the Minister was Membathis Mdladlana, the rates stipulated by the government for companies are very low and most companies want to stick to what was stipulated by the government. For instance a person employed part time must work for 24 hours a week, this does not happen. Companies employ part time staff for 36 hours, 40 hours, we want the government to recognise that. We are hoping that the new minister will come with new ideas, he started dealing with domestic workers, domestic workers are recognised, they are recognised, a minimum living wage has been set for them

Facilitator: medical aid and other benefits what's the delay from Checkers and other retail institutions? Why the delay?

Respondent: for Shoprite, medical aid becomes a problem for the workers of Shoprite. I will give you an example, there was a medical aid called Ingwe which was put in place between 2008/9. The company was paying half and the worker was paying half, people preferred going to public health care facilities because the money the worker had to pay was too much. We are busy trying to sort the matter out with the employer, SACAWU is negotiating on our behalf.

Facilitator: what other benefits do you get from Checkers Shoprite?

Respondent: not that I know of, except for the bonuses, I can't say it's a benefit, it is just a token of appreciation, there is no housing/car allowances, its a struggle, we are still fighting for a living wage.

Facilitator: what about things like maternity/paternity leave?

Respondent: those are in order, for women everything is fine, they are considering giving men paternity leave

Facilitator: are women willing to participate in union matters, retailers like Checkers and so on employ more women than men. What is their position on unions, and their positions in the union structures>

Respondent: they are very high you will find that even at the lower levels gender is taken into consideration, everything we do is 50/50 or women are given the senior position. There is gender equity and Checkers is very cautious about it.

Facilitator: how are the women, are they assertive or are they pushed to get into positions?

Respondent: no they are very energetic when it comes to union issues, nobody is pushing them. You will find that in most cases women were deployed, the first Deputy President of SACAWU was Mme Louisa, she attended the July congress. Most women are recognised nowadays in union structures. We do not have problems as far as gender equity is concerned.

Facilitator: what has been the pressing issues in the last few years, that required unions and so on? You talked about wage issues etc. which were still under discussion?

Respondent: other pressing issues that the union is trying to educate workers on, those are the issues that humiliate unions in the eyes of management is things like theft, absenteeism – both these offences are dismissal offences. We are trying to educate people that the company does not have to write on the walls to inform you that if you are absent from work, steal, drink alcohol at work or fight at work you will be dismissed – stealing is a big problem, we are trying to educate people.

Facilitator: why are they stealing, is it a habit or are they stealing out of desperation?

Respondent: as shop stewards, we realised that it is not always desperation, they steal very small things thus causing frivolous cases, for instance stealing a chocolate bar, or crisps or stole a roll on, petty theft. Such theft will not make a difference in the person's life. It's just being silly.

Facilitator: what causes absenteeism?

Respondent: absenteeism happens a lot on Sundays, retail stores open on Sunday. Other people will tell you that they wanted to go to church even though they were booked to come to work. It's an issue that needs to be resolved.

Facilitator: CCMA because some of these cases end at CCMA and so on, different cases, what is your view on CCMA, has it been working for you guys or has it been working against you, in favour of unions or workers?

Respondent: our union, SACAWU depends solely on members subscriptions, they do not get a certain amount of money like SADTU who have a lot of money, like NEHAWU, they are able to educate their workers, take them to relevant workshops and also train them on what to do in the absence of the union officials, a shop steward can represent a member at a CCMA level. The way things are now as shop stewards we cannot take cases to the CCMA. What I have heard is that CCMA is good at mediating, the problem is sometimes the commissioners become bias even if one has a strong case, hence in the previous congress there was a discussion around certain commissioners are bias and/or they settle. The unions is in discussion about whether to boycott this or not.

Facilitator: labour laws, how are they, are they in favour of the workers?

Respondent: I would say they are neutral and are in place, we don't have problems in as far as labour laws are concerned.

Facilitator: labour brokers, does that affect you as SACAWU?

Respondent: here in the Free State I wouldn't say it has affected, we know and understand the dangers of labour brokers. SACAWU in terms of labour broking affects us in Cape Town, Johannesburg and Durban. I will give an example about Jo'burg, in some shops, although the workers are wearing the same uniform, they are answerable to a certain person. For instance as an employee I will bring in my own people, if I have my own 10 cashiers for instance, they are all answerable to me, should a problem arise, management will say you report to so and so, this impacts very badly on SACAWU in Gauteng province. Free State is not affected, labour broking exists here in the Free State but not so much in the retail sector.

Facilitator: what is the union going to do about it eventually?

Respondent: this last Sunday a comrade from COSATU visited, we are working in conjunction with COSATU in order to deal with the living wage issue. Labour broking will also be part of the discussion, we will be picketing about this, we are going to picket but have to go through the proper channels, give a memorandum to labour, meet with business people etc., the dates is already set up.

Facilitator: other issues like safety at work?

Respondent: we are okay with safety, our surroundings are not dangerous to work with. We are given protective clothes where they are required, everything is in place regarding safety. The company also complies with Workman's Compensation, should you get hurt at work you will be taken to a good health care centre.

Facilitator: and any maltreatment and so on, or people being bossied around?

Respondent: As far as maltreatment is concerned, not now, management do not treat people like that anymore, employers recognise the union. If I can take you back a little, we had this one manager, they used to fool around with the k word and all that. An employee was not happy with this, it became a big issue, the manager was fired for using the k-word, so the white managers know that they will be fired should they make racist remarks. Everything is in place in terms of where the workers can go and complain

Facilitator: what about victimisation as a shop steward and so on, does that happen?

Respondent: not really, the employers knows that the union is strong. When I first joined as a shop steward, I was so inspired by the way NAM operated, if NAM wanted something they negotiated with the employer, and if the employer wanted to do something they consulted with the union first.

Facilitator: have you had strikes since you worked here?

Respondent: no

Facilitator: why, it means you guys are happy?

Respondent: not really, what happens is, once there are negotiations, it is not just give and take situation. What happens is the employer will put an offer on the table if the union wants a little more there will be negotiations. Also it is better to negotiate than to go on strike. We are currently in negotiations, I don't think we will settle with a strike, we will wait for the negotiations.

Facilitator: so any go slow or any other form of protest, stay away, nothing?

Respondent: no in as far as SACAWU is concerned, we don't go slow, everything is still okay for now. COSATU, our umbrella union organises the stay aways.

Facilitator: what about recession, has this affected you in any way?

Respondent: recession affected us a lot especially in 2008, people generally find a way to survive in the little they have, people are now picking up pieces and moving forward in as far as that is concerned.

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

Respondent: I want to talk about Walmart, one of the key issues which were highlighted in 2011 is Walmart. This huge very rich company impacted very badly on SACAWU so far, we believe it is going to change the attitude of companies in as far

as unions are concerned. They want to phase unions out so that they can exploit the workers. It is a burning issue and the government is also involved in it. Jimmy Manyi, COSATU and others are also involved in the discussions. SACAWU is also going to appeal that it operates in South Africa. This almost shook the unions because for SACAWU to fight this multi million company a lot of money will be required, it won't be an easy battle. The union will lose a lot of costs. I think our General Secretary, comrade Bones and the others are dealing with the matter.

Facilitator: what is likely to be the outcome of this whole thing of Walmart, will they be coming into the country?

Respondent: The Competition Commission had given them the go away, but on the basis of the current labour laws they should not retrench people for two years etc., they were given conditions to abide by. Discussions are continuing we will know in due course.

Facilitator: you mentioned that you are also a member of the LOC?

Respondent: yes

Facilitator: SACP or ANC?

Respondent: SACAWU

Facilitator: are there important issues that get discussed at LEC level, SACAWU issues?

Respondent: yes, a lot of issues, for instance locally based companies have a lot of issues that are discussed continuously. We have a huge influx of Chinese/Japanese, they employ our brothers and sisters and exploit them. Indians pay them peanuts. So those are the issues. This is not a challenge for SACAWU or COSATU as a federation, but it's a challenge for the government too. Department of Labour is visiting such companies and checking whether they are in compliance with labour laws, whether the workers are registered or not. Labour is on to such companies. So as LEC members those are the challenges we are discussing, how do we deal with employers who exploit workers. Sometimes I can be deployed to go and talk to someone at Spar, we deal with worker politics.

Facilitator: have you succeeded with LEC problems?

Respondent: yes we succeeded, we cannot be 100% in what we do but we are getting somewhere. There's a small shop called Simunye, when it arrived here, the owner treated the workers so badly, we got involved, we also have shop stewards, our union official negotiates on behalf of the workers, there is some improvement.

Facilitator: do you report the cases to labour or COSATU?

Respondent: we first deal with the owner of the establishment, if they are stubborn, then we ask the province to assist us, if they are still stubborn then we resort to labour. We go to labour as the last step. In most cases things do not go that far they settle before we even get to the provincial level.

Facilitator: any other thing that you think is important that we did not talk about?

Respondent: as shop stewards, at our shop steward counsel that is held once a month at the office, we try to engage other parties, we invite speakers from COSATU, SACP so that they can give us political education in as far as things that are around us, things that we are not aware of. We are mainly focussed on the working class politics, they are able to give us a general view of what is happening currently

Facilitator: is that working so far?

Respondent: so far it's working because a lot of workers understand the importance of COSATU and SACP, most of them would say I'm not a member of COSATU, only to find that part of their subscriptions is paid to COSATU. People are slowly realising that indirectly they are part of COSATU. They are not conscientised. I joined the ANC Youth League, people are gradually becoming aware, they listen to the news, they are now aware that there are a lot of challenges out there, they need the education.

Facilitator: any closing word maybe?

Respondent: In closing I want to say I'm happy with the union operates, although there might be challenges here and there, so far I believe it is victorious. If we didn't have a union we were going to have serious problems. I think the rate of unemployment in our sector is lower compared to when we did not have a union, the town would be cluttered, we would be having a lot of strikes. In closing I would say unions play an important role. SACAWU has tried to deal with the challenges facing it so far.

Facilitator: thanks for your time, greatly appreciate it.

END

Collection Number: A3402

Collection Name: Labour Struggles Project, Interviews, 2009-2012

PUBLISHER:

Publisher: Historical Papers Research Archive, University of the Witwatersrand

Location: Johannesburg

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