

## Sontaga Mantlhakga

Facilitator: This is an interview with comrade Sontaga, we are in Polokwane, the date is 21 August 2012, interview is done by Brown Maaba. Comrade thanks very much for your time. You can speak any language, I will leave it to you. Please give me a background of where you come from, the family background and issues around schooling and how you ended up in unions?

Respondent: I come from Modjadji, a village called Matipane, I schooled there, my primary school. I went to high school there at Masupha High School until 1991, 1992 I went to Modjadji College of Education, and I completed in 1994. In 1995 I started working as a teacher in Maselwana High School until 1999 when I left to join Telkom. When I arrived in Telkom, I grew up within the structures of the movement. From being the secretary of the Youth League in the branch, the Chairperson of the Southern ..(unclear) of the ANC Youth League. The deputy secretary of the region, the North Eastern region of the Youth League. When we demarcate the region, I had to move to another region and became a treasurer of that region. So I was a member of the branch of the ANC, the youngest at the time. So it was not ..(unclear) into politics but starting with the workers politics.

I was working in Bushbuckridge at that time in Telkom when I started work in 1999. I joined the Communications Workers Union. After 8 months in the organisation I became a shop steward, eventually I chaired the local, one of the local areas in Mpumalanga. Bushbuckridge at that time, Communications Workers Union .., even though in a political demarcation of government it was located in Limpopo but on our side we were serving as Mpumalanga.

I chaired COSATU in Bushbuckridge, we called it Skukuza Local, as the chairperson of COSATU. I then moved to Phalaborwa in 2003. I arrived there being an ordinary shop steward.

Facilitator: Of Communication Workers Union?

Respondent: Ja of Communication Workers Union

Facilitator: Of Communication Workers Union?

Respondent: Yes of Communications Workers Union. Anyway I stayed in Phalaborwa, in 2006 I became the deputy secretary of the province of Communications in Limpopo in 2006. When we the elections came in January 2011, I was appointed provincial secretary of Communications Workers Union. I am leading the branches of the ANC, this is my third term as the Chairperson of the ANC, at the branch of the ANC. Ja in short that is my political background. I am likely to retire not long.

Facilitator: You are still young

Respondent: because of the responsibilities of life?

Facilitator: Just to go back, what were your ambitions as a young kid growing up? Did you want to be a teacher?

Respondent: Not really, I wanted to .., I was good in Maths and Science. They forced me to ..(unclear), you know what happened is that when I passed Matric, I wanted to pursue my career at the Technikon, it was very difficult at the time, I come from a poor family. I wanted to work in the mines.

So at that time after Matric I said I am not going to school until I get ..., it's either I'm going to work so that I can raise funds to go and study at the Technikon. I was with my friends, we decided to go around in the township, I was in Gapane Township at the time. We took a round when people were being admitted. So when I arrive at the stream of Maths and Science, I found people standing around and the lecturer. So when I asked what was going on, I was told the people were not qualified. At the time I had my result statements with me. I took a chance and gave it to him, he gave me an admission letter. When I went back home I showed my mother that I have an admission. I was told to go to school in the meantime. That is why I went to Modjadji college. When I finished I didn't want to go to work. One principal in the school heard that I got a distinction in mathematics. He then spoke to my father and said in the meantime because we have a temporary post that can keep him busy. That is when I started working, it was in February. I went there, my father didn't even tell me what I was going to do. He just said go to Maselenabo??, they want to assist you in terms of advice, on what you want to do. When I arrived there they told me that my father told them that I don't want to work as a teacher. Can you assist until you get a job. That is when I started working as a teacher.

But I didn't have ..., I mean it developed. I started to like it, it's unfortunate at the time I was in a temporary post. The principal was fighting for me to be permanent. I got the opportunity. At the time I had two opportunities: the one that I preferred, Sasol, it delayed. Sasol wanted to take me back to the Technikon at the time. but the process took long. I wanted to take a risk at the time because I was not married. So Telkom came on board and I signed a contract with them and I left. I must say when I was leaving, is then that my appointment came as a teacher. Unfortunately I had to leave.

Facilitator: Were you tired of teaching?

Respondent: No I can go back anytime, not tired, I feel I can go back, it's in my profession, I can go back and teach.

Facilitator: Let's just go back a bit. At secondary school were you active in politics?

Respondent: Not really. At that young age you know, I never served in the SRC, but you know people sing you sing with them and so on. It was very difficult to be involved to be involved, but I was not really involved.

Facilitator: Why Telkom, why from teaching to Telkom, that seems to be opposite posts?

Respondent: Even though you went to school for a particular thing, when you go to that environment you will learn, and it was too technical. I am coming from teaching and going to be a technician. It was not difficult, the only difficulty was to climb poles, but I adjusted. The only thing that I believed in is if you can tell yourself that learning is a process, you can take me to work in the mines now, I don't think I will have a problem, I will adjust, take me to the police service, I will survive. I can adjust to any environment as long as I tell myself that I will work in I will. I believe that if you can tell yourself that I will do this thing you will be able to do it. And I adjusted and became the best performer. Let me tell you, in Telkom there's many people coming from other backgrounds which are not technical. There are many teachers there, we adjust, it's not a difficult job. You don't see us going up and down ..., it's just that it's up there, you can drive a bicycle to go and work, it's not a difficult job as long as you tell yourself you can do it.

Facilitator: Your impression of the union structures within Telkom when you arrived? How did you get involved in unions? You came there to work, and then suddenly within eight months you're a shop steward?

Respondent: Ja, as I said I was from a political background, more so when you arrive you arrive in an industry that is dominated by whites at that time. It prompts you and also dominated by old black people, most of them are old and the treatment that they are getting in that workplace also prompts you to be associated with the movement, the union movement to make sure that you protect the workers and the right of the workers. Mind you at that time, it was during apartheid, it was when we governed as the ANC, but going into an industry which is dominated by whites that are still in charge, where racism is deepened, obviously it will prompt you to be active in freeing those old women/men within the industry. You must remember Telkom was one of those that moved from Post Office at the time and most of the people were old. They needed us young people to liberate them from the situation they were in. But most importantly was the political background that I came from. Mind you when I was a teacher I was a member of SADTU as well, even though I was not in the leadership but I was a member of SADTU.

Facilitator: How did you become a shop steward and why you? You were just there for 8 months and suddenly you are a shop steward?

Respondent: I don't know, maybe people saw some potential in me because when you arrive there, you join, when you go to a meeting they just elect you, you won't ask "why me". Maybe there's something they saw in me that is why they elected me. Take it from there. I'm one of those people that ..., if people believe in you, why can't you do it for them.

Facilitator: Which branch of Telkom did you join, was it here in Polokwane?

Respondent: At that time Telkom was still within the regions. I joined in Mpumalanga and was deployed me to Bushbuckridge.

Facilitator: So you worked in Bushbuckridge?

Respondent: Ja I worked in Bushbuckridge for five years.

Facilitator: And you were a shop stewards for five years?

Respondent: Not really five years, 4 and half years.

Facilitator: When you became a shop steward there, what were the pressing issues on the floor?

Respondent: Racism was deep there, where people would be oppressed, some would be favoured in terms of colour. The most important thing was to educate our people about their rights in the workplace. What they were allowed to do and not to do. As young as I was, surprisingly, even old people, very old people, had problems. Mind you at that time I did not have a family, but for some reason old people came to me and talked to me about their family problems. This is one of the things that motivated me .., what were they seeing in me, even sharing those kinds of problems with me. But in the workplace we managed because I told myself that the best tool to liberate the people is to make sure that .., we teach them, we develop them and make sure they understand their role at work, their do's and don'ts, what the company should do them etc. I think I succeeded. I still receive calls from the old people who are on pension to date. I believed that I will make a mark. One day one man said to me, "your arrival here liberated us". It is then I started believing that I made a mark. A legacy is not what you do for yourself, it's what you do for other people, even if you had to die tomorrow they will still talk about you. But if you do things for yourself, when you die tomorrow after a week you are forgotten. This is what I believe in, to live a legacy. That is why to date I still

receive calls from Bushbuckridge, Phalaborwa. I think I've left a legacy, that's why I told you that I'm all about ..(unclear). It feels like I'm going to retire and work and look after the kids.

Facilitator: What were the major achievements as a shop steward in Bushbuckridge? What would you say were your major achievements?

Respondent: Liberating the workers in terms of development, making sure that they understand their role as workers. Two: to protect the workers and ensuring that workers feel they are part of a team, part of the company. You know when I arrived it was all about us and them, but forgetting that we are part of the stakeholders in the organisation. They must understand that the union is ..(unclear) – is part of the .., protect many jobs when people were charged unfairly so. You know in the private sector it's difficult, maybe it's not only Telkom. When you start to raise your head, they will deal with you. They will make sure you get out of the organisation because you will be a bad influence to other people. So we protected many of those who were charged unfairly, they wanted to get rid of. We still continue to protect them. I think it's an achievement for black people in an industry dominated by whites, to feel as part of the organisation even though now we are dominating in Telkom but at the time whites were dominating.

Facilitator: And the older generation of black workers were they willing to join the union, the CWU?

Respondent: They were members, mind you CWU was coming from Postal and Communication, they were just merged and became CWU. All the black people were members of the CWU. The question was were they active in the movement, no. They joined because they wanted protection from the employers. At the time people would deal with them by harassing and undermining their rights. They were not active. You will call a meeting they will just come and sit. They believed in

miracles. The team that I was working with was to make sure that they became part of the organisation, participate within the structures and the campaigns of the workplace. Normally when you go to negotiations you expect to get a mandate from the workers. In those days you could go and negotiate and come back without a mandate and tell them how much you agreed on. They didn't care. But now you will feel that people wanted to be part of the decision making process. I think it's through that process of development, the process of training, the process of engagement that made them to be part of the organisation and participated. We encouraged them to be part of the organisation. The old people just wanted to come to work and mind you they worked with white people, we had to always influence them towards the right direction. It was our responsibility as shop stewards to inform them of their rights, how they can rise above the challenges they were having as managers etc. In a nutshell it's what we have done. I was not alone, I working with a team.

Facilitator: Was CWU the only union within Telkom at the time?

Respondent: No there is still Solidarity and SACWU

Facilitator: Are they both white unions?

Respondent: They are predominantly white, they are white unions, but SACWU is dominated by management.

Facilitator: Do you have a working relationship with the unions, or were they the enemy?



Respondent: Always when you fight it will not be easy to .., individually you think differently. I always told people that when you see, especially in that kind of place, if they need something from you they can't just come to you. Only individuals within those unions would come to us, as and when he comes to the door, you must know that there's something that he needs. But we always assisted them with information, we didn't have a problem to share with them. It was our responsibility and we hoped that maybe tomorrow they will come and join our organisation. But there was no structural relationship, we couldn't have that. It was just a normal relationship, as and when we have a common goal to achieve at the time. But to date as a negotiator to date, we have always had differences. Sometimes when you are busy negotiating they will sign before we do. So it depended on the issues at hand at the time.

Facilitator: Was the management of Telkom warm towards unions?

Respondent: What do you mean warm?

Facilitator: Understanding ..., Telkom is a government owned, BEE owned more or less, so I take it they are probably more advanced and so on in terms of approaching how they deal with unions, rather than be hostile as we are saying in our sectors, in the private sector?

Respondent: No they can't be warm (interruption) – they can't be warm, mind you they are dealing with the interest of the business and we are dealing with the interest of the workers, we must meet somewhere, where I don't know. So that's why it can't be warm, we will always be fighting

Facilitator: All the time?

Respondent: Yes.

Facilitator: When you were at Bushbuckridge, you talked about the achievements, but was the downside of ..(unclear), things that you never achieved when you left?

Respondent: That I can be worried I that I never achieved?

Facilitator: ja

Respondent: I don't remember. Well I think we did what was expected of us

Facilitator: why did you move to Phalaborwa in 2003, was there a specific reason?

Respondent: Ja I wanted to go back home, as I said and at that time I bought a house in Tzaneen.

Facilitator: Okay, so the working conditions there, were they similar to Bushbuckridge or the place had its own dynamics?

Respondent: Own dynamics

Facilitator: Can you elaborate on that?

Respondent: You must remember Bushbuckridge, Phalaborwa is urban, in terms of working conditions it cannot be the same. In Bushbuckridge you have to travel from Bushbuckridge to Manyeleti ..(unclear) more than 100 everyday, but in Phalaborwa that I spend a day in Bushbuckridge ..(unclear)

Facilitator: And the attitude of workers towards the union, similar to Bushbuckridge or different?

Respondent: Not different, there were members of the union and when I arrived in Phalaborwa I found the union so active

Facilitator: As a shop steward did you have to deal with disciplinary cases against the workers and ..(unclear) generally?

Respondent: All the disciplinary cases that are coming in, our responsibility as the union is to protect the workers.

Facilitator: Ja and yourself, were you actually ..(unclear) did you receive some training in between that will enable you to cope and to understand procedures?

Respondent: Ja we went for training but some of the aspects we will deal with them in the process, we will learn in the process because training gives you only the basics. But as and when you go into it you use your own .., but then in the process you will learn the techniques of winning the cases. Ja, we were dealing with those cases and we are still dealing with them through the CCMA.

Facilitator: Were you a full time shop steward or .., (unclear) as a shop steward?

Respondent: I'm a full time shop steward of Telkom from last year August.

Facilitator: In 2011 you became provincial secretary but prior to that you were a deputy in 2006 which ascending ..(unclear) so to speak. What are the broader challenges because you're now sitting in the office, you are no longer a shop steward and you are able to look at the whole picture of the CWU in the province?

Respondent: It's challenges from one sector to another. Remember CWU has got more sectors. It has Post Office, Telkom and SABC, TFMC and Santec. So all the challenges of the organisation and the running of the organisation itself differs from sector to sector.

Facilitator: But are you able as a provincial secretary to deal with all these different problems from different sectors ..(unclear) Telkom?

Respondent: Assistance by the shop stewards within that environment.

Facilitator: Are the other sectors militant?

Respondent: Ja of course, prompted by the nature of the problems within that environment at that time. But as and when you solve that militancy will go down, but another one will ..(unclear), but mostly on the time of substantive negotiations, when you're dealing with money, it's where you will understand the anger of the workers.

Facilitator: Ja. And in terms of benefits, what are the workers getting?

Respondent: No one will be happy with the money that people are getting.

Facilitator: But what is it that is pressing in terms of benefits, is it salaries, is it?

Respondent: Salaries mostly, no one is satisfied with the salary, I am also not satisfied with my salary, I'm always fighting with leaders. Remember that as a government, as the ANC for instance, even though we took over from 1994 we started to negotiate ..(unclear) until today. We never, even in government we never put our own salary scales ..(unclear) SADTU we are starting with 20, so we will continue to negotiate, they are not satisfying. Like this time we said there's no union that will get two digits – people need to be satisfied with their salaries. Things are expensive.

Facilitator: But have you made some headways in trying to solve the issues with the employers?

Respondent: We are always negotiating

Facilitator: with success, without success?

Respondent: What do you mean success, success is when you get what you want and you want to put it on the table. What do you mean success?

Facilitator: So it's difficult to succeed?

Respondent: Ja, the nature of negotiations is when we meet somewhere.

Facilitator: At the present moment Telkom is, I believe threatening to retrench workers and so on because of restructuring. Has the union done something about that or this is beyond your control as the union?

Respondent: We will always engage. You can't say ..., they will have reasons, we will also advance our reasons but we will always engage, as and when we arrive at that point, always prepared to engage.

Facilitator: But CWU members in the province has it expanded, is it declining, are you facing challenges?

Respondent: We are facing challenges of the image of the union in the Post Office, mostly. So membership will be declining because you will understand when new things come people believed that it will be better than the other, they will jump into that. So there are challenges but we're working on them.

Facilitator: And how were you able to bridge the gap between the unions and the ANC because you have other responsibilities and now there's also the family?

Respondent: Time management. You have to manage your time, the other one must not suffer, most importantly the family. Making sure that as and when you are available you must make sure that you are next to them and make them to understand your role as a person; what you want, what you enjoy doing so that they can support you.

Facilitator: So far you have succeeded?

Respondent: Ja so far so good, I am not sure about tomorrow.

Facilitator: This sector has been affected by issues around labour brokering?

Respondent: Ja

Facilitator: What have you done to address that as CWU?

Respondent: In Telkom we are busy phasing it out, we have temps, we put a temp for 3 years. With the Post Office we have an agreement of 2005 but the typical ..(unclear) implementation of it ..(unclear). Those are the most ..(unclear) labour brokers.

Facilitator: So it's more or less difficult to deal with that situation?

Respondent: Ja it's very difficult because the legislation also is a problem, it doesn't say they must be banned as we wanted them to, it will be there but it's between us as organisations and companies to phase it out. As I said we are busy trying to phase it out.

Facilitator: Anything else that you think is important maybe that we did not talk about, that you need to say about the CWU?

Respondent: Not really, communication is still intact, we're still moving forward, it has its own challenges like any other organisation, like any other family but we're

dealing with those challenges going forward. We believe that we will overcome all those challenges and solve them together as an organisation. Ja I think we will deal with that.

Facilitator: And do you think the future of Communication Workers Union is strong, or it is going to decline and disappear 30 years from now?

Respondent: That's a question we always ask ourselves, but we believe there's no such, we are building this organisation for the next generation, to come and defend workers, as a long standing labour movement. We believe it will exist, we will always have challenges when people want to pursue their personal interest within the movement, political interest but Communication will remain a workers ..(unclear) movement, or within the next 30 years we presume that it will be there. Ja

Facilitator: Let me free you mfowethu.

Respondent: Thanks very much.

END



**Collection Number: A3402**

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

***PUBLISHER:***

*Publisher:* Historical Papers Research Archive, University of the Witwatersrand

*Location:* Johannesburg

©2016

***LEGAL NOTICES:***

**Copyright Notice:** All materials on the Historical Papers website are protected by South African copyright law and may not be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, displayed, or otherwise published in any format, without the prior written permission of the copyright owner.

**Disclaimer and Terms of Use:** Provided that you maintain all copyright and other notices contained therein, you may download material (one machine readable copy and one print copy per page) for your personal and/or educational non-commercial use only.

People using these records relating to the archives of Historical Papers, The Library, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, are reminded that such records sometimes contain material which is uncorroborated, inaccurate, distorted or untrue. While these digital records are true facsimiles of paper documents and the information contained herein is obtained from sources believed to be accurate and reliable, Historical Papers, University of the Witwatersrand has not independently verified their content. Consequently, the University is not responsible for any errors or omissions and excludes any and all liability for any errors in or omissions from the information on the website or any related information on third party websites accessible from this website.

This document forms part of a collection, held at the Historical Papers Research Archive, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa.