

Oupa Rakau

Facilitator: This is an interview with Oupa Rakau we are in Ga-Rankuwa the date is 1 August 2012 interview is done by Brown Maaba?

Respondent: Ja not necessarily Soweto, but the 1976 because it happened in Soweto on 16 June, two three days later we were all on fire, there were no cellphones but I'm telling you three days later every high school around here in Pretoria, particularly here in Mamelodi we were all up and we knew exactly what was the agenda.

Facilitator: What was the agenda at the time?

Respondent: Well there was this thing of Afrikaans as the medium of instruction, some of our colleagues, fellow students had a broader picture that this can be extended to a liberation kind of a struggle, liberation in a sense of ..., look during 1976 we funded certain projects out of our own pockets by working in white people's gardens during weekends and this is where we experienced how our parents were having it tough because by merely going there on a Saturday, to work on the gardens or whatever, 2/3 hours, when you come home you are fed up if you understood where you come from. So those are the kinds of experiences that drove us to actually focus. I was doing my Form 2, standard 7 in 1976. In 1977 we were the first group to form ..., there was this thing called Ga-Rankuwa Technical Training Centre

Facilitator: So you dropped out of school?

Respondent: I dropped out at Form 2 to go for Technical Training

Facilitator: Why did you drop out?

Respondent: Well at school there were problems already about the so called student leaders, already some students were arrested, so one was just trying to avert pressure from that. This was a brainchild of the Bophuthatswana Homeland. So the tension was easier this side, although one could pursue their studies, I completed my Form 3 from this side at the trade school. But still the spirit went with us to Bophuthatswana, I also did not finish in 1977. In 1978 there were a lot of trials, comrade so and so is arrested for things like arson, malicious damage to property and we belonged in the groups. I remember people like Madumo, Sesoko etc. 7 guys were arrested and charged with arson. They then left the country in 1978, all of them. After their departure, because we were friends with them, we then became targets of the police, they started harassing us from time to time, where is so and so etc. our lives were constantly checked. I then left and went to work in the industry. My first job was with Murray and Roberts, this is when power stations were being constructed in Kriel, Mpumalanga, Kendal Power Station, Matla Power Station. I was on an apprentice with Murray and Roberts. I was there for about 6 months, I was then transferred to another centre in Potchefstroom, it was called ..., there's an industrial training centre in Potchefstroom called Camdor and from there I came back home

Facilitator: Potchefstroom as in Potchefstroom?

Respondent: Yes Potchefstroom from Mpumalanga to this side. I came back home, galavanted for a year or two. We are now going into the 1980s, in 1979 I joined Asea Electrics in Roslyn. I worked there for 3 to 4 years. At Asea I became active in dissolving structures which were then called Liaison Committees. We introduced trade unionism there. I was recruited by John Mabitsele representing Electrical and Allied Workers Union, Asea was an electrical company that manufactured transformers and cables, Power Transformers and Cables. So I joined that union

there and subsequently became a shop steward. I then became an active unionist at Asea.

During my era there our trade union was not affiliated to any federation, it was an independent union. Around that time there was this other union, a metal union, MAWU, it was affiliated under FOSATU I think. So we became rivals in one company but we understood what the dynamics were. Areas like Port Elizabeth FOSATU unions were very active most of the workers worked in the motor industry. I became part of the Electrical and Allied Workers Union until I was in logger heads with management, perhaps I must explain why. Unions were new to us, I was coming fresh from school and did not understand a thing about trade union movements. There were also resource organisations like Urban Training Project, we were invited to seminars over weekends for workshops where we were taught about basic rules of being a shop steward, how to run an organisation, the principles etc., including management structure of trade unions and how factories can be run if workers are effective in the factories. So as a shop steward I used to attend those kinds of things, others needed my attendance during the week also and this is what made management unhappy. I would leave production to attend such meetings.

We came to some kind of arrangement, if one is not at work two or three days a week, there must be a rule of no work no pay. What happened is the unions compensated us for those days, it was not a problem for me to be away from work for a week because the union would compensate me because I was doing union work. I was then called to a disciplinary hearing which to my amazement it was called by my fellow shop stewards. I was called to the board room for a meeting only to find I'm being called to a disciplinary hearing. I walked out of the meeting and that's how I resigned. I took the matter to the union and the union was reluctant to take my case up. What they did is they employed me as an organiser. So I became an organiser in 1983 to date.

Our union grew in leaps and bound and merged with another similar union which was based in the Western Cape I think and Free State, I think it was Engineering and Allied Workers Union, we merged and formed a bigger union called MEWUSA (Metal and Electrical Workers Union of SA). It was a merger from Engineering and Allied Workers Union, Steel and Engineering Workers Union of SA, Black Electronics and Allied Workers and another one I forgot which I will remember. I will send you the names of all the unions which formed MEWUSA which then applied for affiliation to National Council of Trade Unions, NACTU. NACTU could not be part of FOSATU which formed COSATU because of politics there

Facilitator: What kind of politics?

Respondent: Politics of .., for instance NACTU was more Pan Africanist and Black Consciousness and COSATU was more chaterist, that was the difference. Personally my roots are more Black Consciousness and Pan Africanist although I was not a member of the Pan Africanist Congress of Azania. I played a major role in Azapo and BCM activities in exile.

Facilitator: So are you BCMA?

Respondent: Ja. So basically that's what one was doing and during that time we were working for the unions and at the same time providing some cushion for political activists particularly those that were outside. We could convey messages through our own links, through other federations outside the country, for instance trade unions in Botswana, Zimbabwe etc., we would go there and visit at the same time checking our exiled comrades. We would arrange with them and tell them that we will be in Botswana, people will come from as far as Zambia to meet with you just to exchange certain things, information, messages from home, propaganda material etc. I know we used to distribute a leaflet called "*Letsetse*" BCM newsletter

which was used to communicate with who ever. So we did all those things under the trade unionism wing.

Coming to our real programme of the workers. Of course we organised a lot of workers in the metal industry, particularly in my area Pretoria, Siemens South Africa, Asea, Grinel Electronics, I'm talking about companies which employed a fair number of so called coloured people in Pretoria. We played a major role in mobilising them so that they can start seeing things differently. It wasn't good to go to work, get paid even if you think is better pay, and then go back home, enjoy your weekend, you come back Monday start from scratch without any political or liberation agenda, and to have a say. All what we were fighting for was we became sick and tired of the practice of where you would always find that management says this, there is no input from workers and most of those decisions affected us in most cases. If there's going to be retrenchments, they will just say Head Office communicated the following .., Asea's head office was in Sweden. They would say this is an instruction from Sweden that we must scale down and things like that. We didn't like those kinds of things, we understood ourselves to be part of the company's system. Without us there is no production, some of us we would assist in marking company products by wearing the company's corporate wear. I thought that we need to mobilise people to stand up for their rights. Employees were not paid in terms of the grades defined by the industrial councils then. The people who were paid the correct grades were those that were favoured by management. Those are the kinds of things we fought for, that people must be paid on merit not favouritism. Some people were informers for management so they were paid better. We had no access to phones, if you were not an office worker you were not allowed to pick up the phone. If there was an emergency at home, sometimes you were not given the message or if you were given the message it would be just before you knocked off. They would say you are busy they cannot call you to the phone. If you have a visitor at the gate, the foreman will be informed that someone is calling you at the gate, the plant manager must also know, there were to many hard and fast rules which were not acceptable. We were able to fight the employers because we came into the industry with a little bit of political awareness although the laws of the country at the time was giving them the

latitude. The labour laws were not favouring the workers. Someone will be deployed from Sweden arriving for instance on a Thursday, Monday he would be pelting out instructions whilst he was not able to communicate with you. I've been working there for five years and understand what is going on, he would come with new rules.

I remember a gentleman came from the Forkland Islands, they were appointed as foremen. I read a lot of newspapers, I did then and am still doing so to date. If I find an article about Forkland Islands I would go to him and ask him what is happening, he would say " you won't understand" – he was annoyed with me and from then on they started to target me. They said I was a trouble maker, they were from war torn areas, they were accepted and became our bosses. If you are a true trade unionist you wouldn't accept that. Some plants would have 3 active trade unions but we would agree on one issue that we are not going to allow them to do what they are doing to us.

A number of things happened. We attempted to have unity talks. At the time I sat in the Central Committee of NACTU, previously called Council of Unions of South Africa. So the spirit of "One Federation, One Country, One Union" was always there. There were attempts for us to come together with COSATU to form one federation. I know a lot of people took time to try and put this together, it did not happen because of politics. I also observed that the problem was not only politics, the question of positions people were interested in positions. If you want to embark on a merger, it takes a lot of sacrifices in terms of positions, in terms of resources, materials, etc. You don't just merge because you want to impress the outside world, you must merge in a true sense of the merger. Resources must also be available. Others had very slim bank accounts, others had big balances, those who had money were calling the shots, those were some of the painful things about change when it comes to merging. The problem that we are having in the union movement was caused by material gains. This is a big problem. For instance you are a General Secretary and you are going to be reduced to a Provincial Organiser, this did not go down well with some people. Some guys might even lose their positions and a new

person who is better qualified is employed. Some people were given positions because nobody could do the job, in some instances this was risky. Some people wanted to enjoy receiving the money but they didn't want to take the risk of being on the ground, it wasn't easy. Sometimes when one was coming from work you would get a tip off that there's a suspicious looking car at your home, in most cases it would be the special branch.

My younger brother also left the country after he matriculated. He was a member of I think YMCA, but it was a ANC aligned kind of a youth set up

Facilitator: Siphon Pityana and the others?

Respondent: Ja, that one. So he left and went to exile. I didn't know where he went immediately but the last time I traced him he was in Tanzania. For me being a member of the Central Committee of NACTU, we had Canadian Funders who did not want to come here for whatever reason. So when they did come we met them in Botswana. The Canadians were funding both COSATU and NACTU. I think Mayekiso was there at the time, I will try and remember. So they invited us to Botswana to come and present our proposals for funding purposes. The bigger federation, COSATU went there I think for four days and we were allocated two days. COSATU met with them from Monday to Thursday and we met them Friday and Saturday and came back on Sunday. That's when I started chatting around. One interesting thing was that these people were kept in camps, I'm sure you understand, outside the country. We would go to one camp, say a name of a person if you think he might be there, they will check for you if he is not there they will refer you to another camp if he was in Botswana. So I was told at Dukwe Camp that my younger brother is in Botswana but he's been arrested because he was found carrying a pistol which is classified as a weapon of war.

So I started frequenting the place because I wanted to meet him and to appease our parents that he is alive. I had a union car, so it was easy for me to knock off on a Friday if I had no plans for the weekend I would drive out to Botswana, a five hour drive. So I would always go there, sleep over where ever. The people in Botswana were welcoming up until I found out where he was, he was arrested at Gaborone Prison.

Now this in and out movement was monitored by Bophuthatswana police. One guy came over Mr Phefo, it was in the morning. He introduced himself to me and told me that his commissioner of police wants an answer as to why am I frequenting Botswana so much, am I smuggling anything into Botswana or what .., I must explain because they suspected that something is not right. Then I said to him I have a girlfriend in Botswana, I do not need anybody's permission to go and see my girlfriend in Botswana, I will visit her anytime as long as I have the means. And also my country gave me a passport to travel, that's permission enough. So that's how I got rid of him. But that was not enough. I then went there again with one comrade of mine, Simone, he had to go for military training. On a Sunday on our way back, the system was like this, you would push your passport through the window, they check it, you fill in the form and they stamp it and then you go to the official of the other country they also follow the same process. So in order to exit you have to go through Botswana authorities and then ours is the last one. Zeerust was Bophuthatswana area around Motsweding area, but the border post was manned by the South African Police.

So when I gave them my passport it was stamped on the Botswana side but the South African side did not stamp and withheld the passport, they just said "next" and called another person. Nothing was explained to me. So I was just waiting there at the door, then they were serving everybody coming in. It was around 9 in the morning, and then it was 10, then 11. I then inquired. I was told that somebody is coming to interview me he is coming all the way from Zeerust, they asked me to wait. I had a chance to can run but that didn't come to mind. There were a lot of lifts, I could have left the car there. I waited, around 2 in the afternoon this man

came and then there was this old man, very elderly black man, he said to me "there's a man who is coming to interview you, if you don't co-operate I'm afraid you going to remain here, but if you co-operate then it's find". I asked co-operate with what. He told me he was worried because I've been there for the whole day. The man arrived, he was driving a Monza. They called him in and was briefed and then I was called into an office at the border post. He introduced himself, I didn't even try to remember his name or surname, he was white. He told me that they are worried about my movements between Botswana and South Africa. He asked me what I was doing and what is my business. I told him I have a girlfriend in Botswana. He wanted to know her name, so I just gave him a name and then he asked me where I stayed in South Africa. I told him where I stayed, my house number, Ga-Rankuwa Zone 2, 2683. He asked me the kind of work I did, I told him I'm working for a trade union as an organiser in the Northern Transvaal Region. He asked me what I was paid I told him how much, I also told him it's peanuts but we are surviving. He then asked to check my bags. I agreed. He found a lot of books, labour bulletins, newsletters from international trade unions, Canada, some union t-shirts. Well there was no serious material. He then said I'm taking all these things and that I can come and collect them after 7 days. I said fine. It was late, after 6 in the afternoon, I was happy they let me go home. I came back home.

When I arrived at home, the first thing on Monday I went to Jo'burg to report this thing. Our offices were in Wanderers, Dorkay House. So I went there and told Mr Pirosho Kamay who was the general secretary. He was in Zeerust caught up there for almost the whole day, I told him what had happened and that they took some of my belongings, they said I must come back after 7 days. He said fine and told me he will seek advise. But then Siska Mpepe was the legal person of the federation, she handled most of our cases. So Pirosho got advise from her that I should not go and collect those things, she said they will detain me. So I didn't go and they didn't come. Three, four, six months down the line nothing happened. I then went there again and there was no other border, Zeerust border was the nearest because after that you travelled less than 20 kilos you are in Gaborone. So it was very convenient. You could travel in and out in a day. So I went there, after checking out of the two border gates, right in the town of Zeerust there was a road block. It was meant by

SANDF. They then started searching our cars, found pamphlets that they were not impressed with. They took me to Zeerust police station and was detained there for I think a week. They then released me but they told me it was conditional, they can always come back, they need to verify things. I should not worry because they have friends in Pretoria who will pick me up. Our office was in Bosman Street in Pretoria. To tell you the truth it was not normal for them to let me stay there for a week with no visitor from special branch. We asked ourselves what happened. The most worrying thing for me was ., at times I used a train to get to work because we were sharing the car in Pretoria. They knew all my movements, they knew I was driving a Datsun Pulsar and sometimes I was using a train.

So one day in the morning there was a guy organising for Food and Allied Workers Union, Mojalefa Vinxa, our offices were opposite each other, he loved food. He came by train and bought pap and meat at shisa nyama where they cooked very early in the morning. He bought pap and pork leg. He invited me to eat with him I said thank you, then an old man arrived in our office and told us that his friends are coming, he needs our co-operation, he was referring to the Special Branch. It was around June. The trend was towards the 21st of March that week there will be serious raids and unnecessary detentions just to disturb the flow of organising things, the same thing would happen around June 16, also May Day, defiantly we would take that holiday off whether it was on the calendar or not, all of us, we didn't care whether we are paid or not. Everybody celebrated May Day. So the special branch monitored all the important days and raid offices, detain people etc., just to cause some kind of disturbance. Mojalefa was taken in just before we went for June 16 celebrations. Bear in mind this was unique during the struggle, you had the labour movements who were spearheading political dates. We made sure that the 21st of March is celebrated, we will make sure June 16 is celebrated, we will make sure May Day is celebrated, irrespective of political affiliation. We made sure that the workers would celebrate. We would use such platforms to fight for those rights, whether it's low wages, equal wages etc., women's rights we would raise our voices there. It was nice because political speeches would be delivered. So Mojalefa was taken before June 16.

Facilitator: Ja.

Respondent: They said to me, you tell the others if they don't behave we will always come and pick them up. I was sharing an office with Philip, he was a serious Pan Africanist, I was this side BCM person. So they would use that thing to try and divide us.

Facilitator: Okay.

Respondent: If they raid the office and they find him there they will always tell him things about me that I do against him and if they find me during a raid they will tell me things about him. Okay like I said it was quite abnormal for a week to go past without a special branch visit. So we got used to that. Then one day, this was towards 1990, 1989, then this guy came, he was heading the security police here, Muller. He came in and asked where are the other guys, I said nobody is here, they have gone out they're organising I'm sorting out certain things I'm also going to the field. He then said by the way what political organisation do you belong to? I said no I don't belong to any political organisation because there is no political organisation in this country. He said to me "I'm not stupid" he told me he knew everything, who belongs to what party etc. He then said to me that do I not know that all political organisations are going to be unbanned. I said I didn't know. He told me he hates trade unionists who do not read. All of a sudden I got a tongue lashing from this guy. So he said to me come clean which one do you belong to. I didn't say, a couple of months later, first it was the lifting of The State of Emergency, and then there was all these processes. I then started to worry and realised that I took it for granted when I was told by the white man. Then the unbannings came, some of us lost focus thinking we are liberated, only to wake up five years later and find out no liberation has not yet been achieved. I think we were taken by surprise even though we were fighting everyday for this thing .., we were totally not prepared to take over. I remember during the trainings of Urban Training Project, we were able to deal with such subjects, the role of trade unions post liberation, what

are we going to do, what will be our role; the tripartite alliance were discussed in those days, are we helping the political parties today to get their agendas through and then withdraw (interruption) – what is going to be our role, are we going to align with the political parties or are we going to stick to our objectives. We differed in opinions. Personally I'm was not surprised to see the tripartite alliance because labour movement were not sure if they will still be relevant if they are on their own, post liberation, or they will be relevant when they are part of this brother whom we have helped to liberate. So that is why you will find that we still could not come together as NACTU and COSATU as one big .., we saw things differently ..(unclear) that's why we are saying we will always support the government of the day but we don't want to be part of that machine, of that system. We will suggest policy issues, we will try and be helpful in terms of sustaining or building a better economy but we cannot be seen as part of government and that's when we said "together we will build this and become a successful ...", so all those things were happening in the past. That is why I wanted to emphasise the issue of .., that's why some of us, five/ten years down the line after liberation we still believe we are not yet liberated, certain things are not on the same level, the field is not level. So we had those differences, and some of the people that we looked up to were for good reasons absorbed into the system. They were absorbed by the state because of their skills, their skills were required and relevant in the reshaping of the country and at the same time they were leaving vacuums where they left. The spirit and rhythm they left could not be sustained by those who remained. Some were absorbed by capital, others felt they've fought enough and they saw opportunities and they grabbed the opportunities. So we started taking different directions. The other day there was a community meeting and somebody asked me if I'm attending, I said no, some of the things I was fighting for was repossession of the land, and people said they wanted the right to vote, what else happened after we got the right to vote. I told him I've got a farm, and the main objective was to have a piece of land that I can control and produce something out of it. We went our different ways, others are very successful from both camps, chatarist, BC etc., people have contributed to the country even after liberation they made enormous contribution. There are those who are still very angry and bitter. A lot of things are happening and if you do not have an ear on the ground you will feel left out and that your contributions are not recognised.

The government formed special pensions for people who contributed to the liberation, the government is giving them a little gesture, others benefit but others don't although they were doing the same thing, if you ask why is this happening, others would say they did not know when the applications were made, others applied late, others were rejected, people don't benefit the same out of state resources, let alone those who worked on their own to achieve whatever they've achieved. Some people were not properly integrated in the Defence Force, Police and other security institutions, maybe if somehow you came from a wrong camp or you support wrong people. There is no general blanket of recognition of people who contributed for the liberation of the country. So I know there are those angry people, justifiably so .., because we don't have a system in this country, we don't have a system like you guys are doing to try and archive the history of the labour movement. We don't have a system of collecting data, of collecting information. My mother, your mother, everybody played a role by merely bringing you up irrespective of the challenges that faced them. It was a contribution they made. Some of us our parents would hide us under the bed to protect us, that's a contribution. Some people came running .., we used to accommodate people who came from as far as the Eastern Cape, somebody who couldn't speak a single word of Setswana, we couldn't speak iSixhosa either, we shared a bed and plate of food here, our mothers contributed. These are the contributions which are not recognised. The only contribution that is recognised is through structures that were there established, maybe very popular structures. So many things happened, for instance you would go to a funeral and learn about this person when the obituary is being read – the person was disgruntled and didn't want anything to do with the organisation he was affiliated to. Most people played a role but they are not recognised.

Some of us we distort a lot of truth, things are turned around in order to benefit some of us. I remember an incident where I was politicising people and was told that if some of the guys I was with were arrested in the process of going into exile, it means you were a pimp. He wanted to know what was I doing, I told him we couldn't do everything at once. Other people would prepare to leave the country and on

instinct decide not to go anymore, they just relied on their instincts. Others would reveal why they eventually didn't go of course others wouldn't. Some people were not happy, others were happy, others were impressed others were not impressed. Personally I'm not angry with anybody, I just point a finger at myself, I could have done more, if I had done enough I wouldn't doubt anybody's success. I lost a lot of opportunities simply because I don't have papers to produce, I have the knowledge, experience etc. I was an adult educator for a long time ..., I did a lot of presentations. I worked ..., ever since 1994 I've been involved with the IEC, at different levels. In 1994 with the first elections I was the regional co-ordinator in the Transvaal of NEON. From there 1995/96/97 I worked for an organisation called National Initiative for Reconciliation, it was a church based organisation at Pretoria Council of Churches, I was based at the Anglican Church, St Alban's Cathedral in Schoeman Street, I was doing conflict management, reconciliation because as you can understand people were still not allowed to go to certain areas, other people were still not prepared to accept others because of the past, things started changing in 1994, so in 1995 it was fairly new, a lot of things still needed to be corrected. I also did work for the TRC, I was a statement taker. After NEON I was with NIR for three years or so. After that we started a project with the Department of Land Affairs, after the land restitution was properly approved. We were facilitating workshops for all the land redistribution beneficiaries. To me it was still political, I was still contributing politically. Those who got their land back we advised them on how best they can make use of the land. Some settled for the financial settlement, we tried to give guidance. So like I'm saying I could have achieved a lot of things it's just that I didn't have certain qualifications to prove this is where I am.

I'm not sure what I did not touch in terms of my life and the labour movement, but at the end of the day all these things ..., the influence originated from the trade union movement.

Facilitator: Ja, and unions today are they still relevant?

Respondent: To me they are not relevant as such it's just a formality, unions are formal mechanisms which management use to communicate ..., I'm saying this because today there are laws that even if I'm not unionised I'm protected. That is why most unions have investment wings, unions are run like businesses. I can be retrenched now and get my package from work, but my union has billions invested somewhere where I do not benefit, but my contributions built the empire. So I don't think they are relevant today. I can work anywhere and be a non union member and still benefit. If I have a problem with my employer I can go to CCMA which does not require me to be a member of a union. Yes it's an added advantage if I go there belonging to a union but as an individual my problems can be attended to. To my unions have taken a different shape and side.

Facilitator: Ja so there's no future for unions in the country?

Respondent: Not for now, I can't say there's no future, maybe they need to change their strategies and tactics

Facilitator: Just to go back, you mentioned that you were BCM influenced, I don't know whether that happened before the Soweto Uprising, the level of politicisation here in the 1970s, how was it like?

Respondent: I can say it was like that ..., you know around that time we had ..., there was a cultural group here in Ga-Rankuwa called Dashiki. We were very close to Dashiki and their doors were open to everybody, so we used to listen to a lot of seasoned politicians and guys who were involved in politics, they were visitors to Dashiki from time to time. I knew people like Abbey Xindi, musicians, artists, a lot of artists, some have passed on, they used to come there. You would be given a book "mfana go and read this thing and let's discuss it tomorrow or when", that's how we got the books. Steve Biko had projects in Winterveldt and surrounding areas. Some of us didn't know who Steve Biko was ..., slowly we learnt about the politics and

understood that we were exposed to powerful people. So really I think my politicisation around that time, 1976 clearly was on the Black Consciousness thing, I'm black and proud, those kinds of things.

Facilitator: And the idea of looking for a job, was it because of pressing family issues or ?

Respondent: No, the choices were there. I think it was a question of ., although I can say in my family I'm the one who actually did not go as far as where my parents wanted me to go. There's quite a number of graduates in this house and ironically I was offered bursaries .., I was schooled from primary my parents didn't pay for my school

Facilitator: what were the connections, were they learned people, where did the bursaries come from?

Respondent: From church

Facilitator: so they were church people?

Respondent: Ja I was very close to church, we were active, you know there were so many things because at church our youth club also exposed us to another level of things. Most of the people who are serving in government some of them we belonged to the same youth club, some we shared same high school although I didn't go far but ., so I got those bursaries, my text books were delivered early every time, and then I think I abused the situation because I should be having something to show today. I was offered very good opportunities, but like I say the choices were

there. I said to myself if I'm not educated I can always make money and become a businessman etc.

Facilitator: As a shop steward of Electrical and Allied Workers Union what were the pressing issues, shop floor issues?

Respondent: I think it was inequality in the sense of, the kind of treatment, wages is the major one and even the line of management. You get some guy who is a university graduate being supervised by a white boy who's never been to university but he's in charge of a laboratory in a factory. This man, the black one with qualifications is the one doing major experiments and tests, but because the white one has been around for some time in the company he was senior. There was a lot of inequality which was not helping us at all and disparity in terms of wages. Those are the kinds of things that one was fighting for. The other thing was exploitation in terms of you are made to work long hours but you don't get better rewards. To work on a Sunday from 7 to 2 or 4 the latest, if you look at the pay it is not worth the time that you've wasted there. So I think there was a lot of exploitation. There was this thing of "leave me alone I'm working for my children", people were prepared to work under such conditions because they felt that they were working for their children. That was one of our major problems, to try and sort that out. You have a union meeting at that corner 3 guys are not there, "I'm working for my children, the next thing you will be telling us to go on strike, I am paying a bond on my house" those attitudes were very challenging for me because I would even sacrifice my own time to prove to them that this is not the way we are doing things. Your house and all that is for now, but the long term objectives ..., what we are doing will ensure that their future is much better not only by them having a roof.

Facilitator: But did such people eventually come on board or they got worse over time?

Respondent: You can't win them all, but I think the union movement of today has achieved that objective. We could not do it because some come from that deep rooted culture of the Liaison Committee. What companies used to do was say to people those who don't believe in Liaison Committees are free to join unions but we remain with these ones – who will always get first hand information, Liaison Committees. Our objective was to get rid of such structures completely because they were highly stereotyped. Information was coming from this side, they even forgot protocol. A shop steward is a representative of workers at the shop floor for different grievances, you are not a foreman nor a supervisor. But some managers were happy to confuse these things, just to create a problem out of it. Jacob is regularly coming to work late, please talk to him as his shop steward. You blindly go and tell Jacob the employer says you are regularly coming to work late, pull your socks up. Jacob will say to you "are you my supervisor or shop steward, do you agree with those guys that I'm late, you don't tell them that there's no transport from where I come from". You see the intention is .., it was just an honest request – but in a true spirit of a shop steward is not your business to reprimand your members through the instructions of management, you can rather do it in your own meetings and say guys let's protect each other. So that's how things were happening. Even the Liaison Committee members they were used for that purpose, overlooking foremen, overlooking supervisors use these guys to deal with the workers. Those were some of the challenges.

Facilitator: And the merger of these unions the Electrical linked unions to form MEWUSA, were there challenges?

Respondent: Ja there were serious challenges because some did not see this thing as a merger, they saw it as an absorption or take over by influential people, or still it was a political influence outside. You guys believe in BCM, you guys believe in PAC, and those ones semi charterists, so you get instructions from Tambo, Mlambo, Mangena and others, so no we not accepting the merger, there were tensions. Some were worried about losing their positions as indicated before, what is going to be my future, some of offices might need to be closed because it will be a

duplication. Imagine yourself going to work with this person whom I did not greet for so many years, I'm going to start working with this one, there were those tensions. Because we understood what we wanted, the commitment .., what we did is we called a conference of all organisations where we made pledges. This was well planned, we first pledged our commitment to this merger before forming a lot of sub-committees because there were so many committees. There were committees that were going to look at the finances of all organisations, there were committees that were going to look at assets of all organisations, committees that were going to look at the staff complement, committees that is going to look at the structures, the size of the organisations, all those things. I think the people who were sensitive were those who served in the committees, they did not communicate proper messages to the workers even though there were structures where feedback could be tabled and filtered down. But some would get gossips, people were generally misinformed. In the end the principles/policies were professionally formulated in the spirit of transparency but like I say there were tensions.

Facilitator: And NACTU itself was it sustainable to ..(unclear) NACTU I mean vis a vis COSATU which had more financial resources and so on?

Respondent: No it was sustainable, Okay normally what is happening, maybe you know this already. Each and every affiliate, there is a fee that they must pay as an affiliation fee to the federation. I think it was on monthly basis. Those stronger unions they might at least pay a six month fees in order to boost the coffers and then like I said there were still some outside funding, even though it was at a small scale because funders are like sponsors. They want to sponsor something which in return can bring .., they must have certain returns too. If you don't make a lot of noise in the country and show your funders that you are vocal, how can they support you, maybe you are spending the money. I think COSATU was making the right noises, you see there was this politics of .., we called them zero politics, if I say how many people were in that meeting I will say you have counted 100, they will say no it was not 100, you missed a zero, it was a thousand, you put another zero there. Then it

changes the whole face of everything. Now with NACTU we tried to be honest and this killed us, honest in numbers, honest in everything.

I will tell you something which we were told. When we went there we had our audited financial statements, federation, we had them like this, Phirosho took them on, the Canadians, he said "I want to know if COSATU has also done the same". They said "no they've expressed that they are too big, they are countrywide and we wanted to see them in a short time but they couldn't finish rounding up their regions to give us a proper financial accountability because they will always go there and claim we are not 200 000, add a zero there it changes the whole figure, just a zero at the end. So they were inflating numbers of their membership. If you say let's have an audit, they will always tell you those kinds of things. sometimes offices were burnt, and then we changed the system, the offices were bombed overnight they suspect a third force. So popularity within those ranks was not merely because of good organising, they also had tactics and strategies of how to keep attention, to pull people's attention to a certain focal point. Now when we go to a sponsor and we tell them clearly we have one health union with 4000 members, we've got a union in media 300 they are journalists they can't be so many, and then we have a union in engineering, 16 000 we are honest, we've got a union in the food industry they are so many, we have a union in transport, they are so many. The others will inflate, we believed that you cannot liberate your people out of false pretence, you should be real on certain things so you know I'm going to join NACTU union, and transport and I believe they said they are 800 and it's true they are 800 they are not 8000, there's no extra zero there. So I'm building them up, I'm going to make sure that they are 1000 or so.

Facilitator: for MEWUSA were all of you of the idea of joining NACTU, were there people who were of the idea of going to COSATU, charterists maybe?

Respondent: Ja they were there but because .., you know that is one thing that is very unique in the factories, or by then. You find that I'm a charterist from home, full

force. I happened to work for BMW which is a non chaterist .., a union which is organised there. But because I'm a worker I must just join that union but I know that I'm a chaterist. So you will always .., if things don't go your way, if you like you will always tell them I don't see them this way I see things this way, I don't believe in your policy it's unfortunate that I'm part of it because of shop floor politics, but broader politics I won't be part of. So there are those people who would say I am in this union because the majority in the factory belong to the union. It's the same as an organiser, I come from a strong BC background, I applied at NUMSA and was given the job. I put my politics aside and continue with my work as long as I've got nothing that influences their processes because if I don't come with this agenda.

Facilitator: ..(unclear) BC aligned people and then there was a PAC stream?

Respondent: I think that is the thing that has kept NACTU very weak up to today, that's a confession one must make. It doesn't help because even in leadership appointments, there were those positions which would strictly be reserved for Pan Africanists and they will be those positions that would be reserved for BC guys, being deputy this and that, that has kept that organisation even today where it is. That is one organisation with good principles, well run but because of internal divisions, they are not growing. In NACTU they believe that workers are the vanguard of the struggle, workers are those who are taking decisions. Decisions are not taken by officials. You attend one big organisation, you go to COSATU, there's even a slogan "hlale phansi thate mthetho" – you are here to listen to leadership and you must take the direction that the leadership is giving. I don't know practically a proper consultative process that I've seen happening in the COSATU ..(unclear) as compared to what I've seen at NACTU. Let's say there's going to be a metal industry strike countrywide. The Industrial Council will need clarity as to whether this is the blessing of the workers, the unions will say yes and then the Council will need proof, proof will be obtained by way of going to each and every plant, where we are going to seek a mandate, whether by way of a vote, ballot or consensus by word of mouth that yes .., we will be taken to task even if a factory has 12 workers, they will say go there, they are members of this organisation, we need to know what

they are saying. We didn't communicate with our members through newspapers or radio or any mass media, it was direct contact, it will take us time to come up with the results but we would go there. If ever this is going to be a strike, the results will be made transparent and say this is what the workers have agreed to, not with the other comrades that side. Those ones they say .., they take a decision and tell maybe an Industrial Council, we call it NEDLAC today, they say they are going to consult and they don't consult, they just take a break. When they come back it's happening .., every time they say they are going to consult there's a conclusion now of late, public service concluded the wage negotiations. The negotiations started in January to negotiate this thing, there was nearly a strike but they concluded I think yesterday, they concluded 7% increase. I heard that unions have asked for time to go and consult with members. I go there and ask .., the workers say they know nothing. They do not inform the workers. Unions no longer have general meetings where workers will be put into a hall, book a community hall and put them there and communicate issues of the organisation. I don't know maybe because of technology maybe they are using sms, emails etc., but I don't believe there is proper consultation. You are not supposed to take a decision without the consent of workers.

Facilitator: Last two questions. What happened to your brother who was in exile?

Respondent: He is back home, he became an army general

Facilitator: Was it worth it be in unions or?

Respondent: It was worth it, we gained tremendous knowledge, I can tell you there's no better schooling than the one that you can get from a trade union movement. I'm saying this from even international experience, whether home or abroad, as long as you are an element that wants to contribute to this economy or any economy you have to be unionised, if you don't have the background you are

not complete. There can be so many benefits from any employment with your nicely put qualifications, but without this basic knowledge, I think I can even tell you now, that is why there is no company which does not want to reinforce the Human Resource Department, it's part of the key elements and people who are there, heads of HR departments, they make sure that they understand the language of the unions. You cannot go there without knowing how to handle them, if you don't know that then the company is doomed. HR without a strong labour movement also will be doomed. I don't regret my involvement in unions, I will encourage any worker to be involved. What worries is that I don't sit well when it comes to .., I may be contradicting myself but I have to say this. You know the police, teachers and even soldiers I think there must be some kind of structure that might represent them from within their respective institutions. I will tell you what, teachers are workers like every other worker but they are very special workers, theirs is to build human beings. I can tell you that since the emergence of SACTU, there's battles in the education corridors, whether performance of teachers, performance of students, performance of the department of education every time there is a clash, and these guys do not know what ..., I used to interact with a lot of schools, you know you can go to a school, try and secure an appointment with teachers wanting to come and present something relevant to the school. You will never get their support but call a SACTU meeting during working hours, they will put their chinks down and attend the meeting. The way trade unionism within that sector has become an OPIUM, principals I pity them, they don't have control these days because in no time .., and they can make it a point that you are re-deployed because they sit in so many structures. So I see it as a deterrent for now, they took it by storm and now it's a monster they cannot control, staff. I don't think this country will ever have peace with teachers as long as teachers are still so highly unionised. At least the police and soldiers is something else because at the end of the day there's a medium of instruction there, it's instructions, you get instructed even though there are unions, teachers need to be consulted, they don't need to be instructed that is the problem. Police at least there's an order that will come from the commander, the commander will instruct them, but these ones they say "consultation first" and consultation without limits is another problem. If we consult there must be limits, it cannot be a continuous thing, "consult, consult, consult". It's the first time I hear of overtime pay for teachers. So it's more than a profession so it was better when it

was a calling, it is no longer and calling. They don't sell their services, if they sell it the price is not worth it, the price that they get for the service that they are rendering is not okay. These people are well paid but the service they are rendering to us, our children or the government is not worth it.

So maybe that one I will have a negative response to. I think it's one field which needs careful thinking .., to unionise those ones.

Facilitator: Any closing word maybe?

Respondent: Well the trade union movement has a great future as long as it can be reshaped .., it needs some restructuring, approach is not okay, I want to justify it .., the alliance kind of relations with the ruling party is not helping workers because today you say this, the next day you're drinking tea with the very same person that you say is your enemy. Another thing, workers need to understand that economic politics .., that is the word that I want to convey to trade unions. If a person goes to work because he must work to put bread and butter on the table, that is not enough, they must understand the broader picture. The broader picture is that you are building the economy of this country and then what is your size of contribution towards building that thing. The salary that you draw is a side thing, it's not a problem but at the end of the day you're building an economy so if trade unions can re-focus, re-share their approach to the broad working class, changing the mindset that we will always address our issues by marching down Church Street or whatever street .., workers have got the power, they have the strength and that strength is through proper engagement with the powers that be, not to take to the streets, it's not helping this economy, let's engage these people. We have been trained to do this, they've been trained, why are there so many training institutions, there are so many universities and so on training people on labour relations issues, can you really go and get a doctorate in labour relations and still lead people to the street? No, we think that you will be skilled enough to can negotiate better things for these people. Now if we fail to talk and use the power of the masses, that

strategy is fading away. It's fading away because now people are going to be made to pay damages that they caused during strikes and things like .., now you will see the strategy will change, so they better start it now. There is a very major role that unions will play in this country, as long as we change focus and deal with worker issues, and make workers to control this organisations. The trade unions employ researchers such as yourself and say this is a research person, they don't groom their own research unit and that can happen, "give me two/three guys let me teach them the ropes" and you can supervise them. So these days they want to go and employ professionals and give them all those .., we no longer have general secretaries in trade unions, we have CEO's, he takes the role of a CEO he even wants to be paid like a CEO.

Facilitator: With benefits

Respondent: the whole national executive of the federation of the trade union .., serve on boards, things are changing.

Facilitator: Thank you, that was wonderful. Thanks

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