

Enjy John

Facilitator: This is an interview with Enjy John we are at Bophelong in the Vaal, the date is 21 September 2009, interview is done by Brown Maaba. Thanks very much for your time, you can speak English or any other language you are comfortable with. Just give me a background as to how you ended up in union structures.

Respondent: It was by chance, a family friend who used to work at COSATU told me about the vacancy. He told me there's a vacancy at FAWU in 1995. I went for an interview and was offered the job as an Administrator. I became an organiser in 2000

Facilitator: As an administrator did you have administrative skills?

Respondent: Yes I had done a Secretarial Course

Facilitator: Was this your first job?

Respondent: Yes it was my first permanent job.

Facilitator: What were you doing before that?

Respondent: At the time it was called Lekwa Municipality, I was doing data capturing for the voters roll for the Vaal.

Facilitator: How much understanding did you have about unions coming from the municipality into another world because unions is just another world?

Respondent: I didn't know much but my mother was an activist. Workers would come to my home and meetings were held at my home. My mother was the secretary for the independent union, FEDCO. I was not part of the meetings but I my knowledge started there. I got to know more after joining the union.

Facilitator: what was your understanding of FAWU when you arrived here, what was your impression?

Respondent: When I arrived and started as an organiser there was no induction, you had to learn as you went along. One had to develop oneself, I had to learn and fortunately when I arrived the existing organisers invited me to meetings so that I can learn and that is how I learnt about unions in general. There were other affiliates who also assisted me to learn more.

Facilitator: What were the burning issues then as an administrator, what was your impression about burning issues?

Respondent: The burning issues in most cases the workers would complain about wages if anything else, the focus was mainly on wages if anything else, when there were wage negotiations the workers demanded a lot of attention. The other thing was that workers who were categorised as post 1994, the struggle is over ...,people realised that the struggle is now beginning, things became more difficult than in the apartheid years because they had to face the enemy face to face. The workers

thought that democracy also meant economic freedom, people didn't realise that we are still very far from it. It was a challenge for the workers, they could not understand that if we are in a democracy but why are things still the same, when are things going to start changing. The workers felt more oppressed than before.

Facilitator: why was that the case? Why were they more oppressed post 1994 than before or more frustrated than before?

Respondent: Okay. Like I said during the apartheid regime we knew the face of the enemy, so workers thought after 1994 things are going to change, salaries will be higher and benefits will improve and that everything will be sorted out. Those were the expectations, what they didn't know they is they still had to fight for living wages and the benefits. Generally workers thought the government is going to fix things for them, people were not able to distinguish between government and business.

Facilitator: were there any other challenges than this one?

Respondent: Not really. The union operations at the time were easier because the shop stewards in those years were very militant. They were able to organise their own meetings, there were overnight meetings, shop stewards in those days did not take up leadership positions because of the benefits but because they wanted to see the organisation progressing.

Facilitator: what happened today if the shop stewards in those days were militant, what about today, how are the shop stewards today?

Respondent: I don't want to go to court. Let me compare the shop stewards in those days with the shop stewards of today. The previous shop stewards even if they did not get the relevant training, they would go and get the information, they were interested in developing themselves. I am not saying that all of them today are not doing that. Most of the stewards today expect information to come to them, they don't go out of their way to be empowered, they are always complaining about training. Although things were difficult in those days, but I was able to engage with the shop stewards not only about organisational matters but also about politics and issues in general. Nowadays the shop stewards get benefits they start competing for positions. That is the difference between the shop stewards in those days and the shop stewards of today

Facilitator: do they get benefits?

Respondent: no. If you are a very committed shop steward, you must sacrifice your time, meaning your family time and money. Others use their money for instance to visit workers. For instance let's say at the SAB a worker wants to be transferred to another plant, a committed office bearer will assist other plants even if they are not in his group, he won't be able to claim but he will use his own money to help the worker. Some shop stewards do not go and consult they just go and mislead the workers without the necessary knowledge. The real shop stewards go out and consult in order to get the relevant information.

Facilitator: is there a way in which they can change, the current shop stewards, is there hope?

Respondent: There is a way, it's all about commitment, a person can attend many courses, workshops if that person is not ready to be developed you cannot do much for them. You can take a horse to the river but you cannot force it to drink water.

Some of the shop stewards have been in the field for many years but seem like they've just started.

Facilitator: You talked about training, what kind of training is being offered today for shop stewards and other members of FAWU?

Respondent: Training basically is for shop stewards, they have this basic training where they learn the role of shop stewards and of course understanding the recognition agreements if there should be a dispute or anything of that nature. Not just the recognition agreement and other existing agreements which exist so that management can be engagement. And also they need to understand how to address problems with management and to understand the constitution of the organisation, it is very important. To understand how to represent workers at plant level, how to represent them, how to get the mandate, it can either be the mandate of wages and substantive issues. Also to give feedback to the workers, that is another problem, how feedback is given to the workers. Although in FAWU training hasn't began since the elections, but there are programmes for training shop stewards in place.

Facilitator: do you think the training sessions are effective?

Respondent: As I had indicated, shop stewards are different, to others the training is effective to others not. It depends on the individual, whether he understands and how the information is going to be utilised.

Facilitator: so every time a shop steward is employed do you train them?

Respondent: That is how it is supposed to be done, there were hiccups at FAWU. The last shop steward appointed, before the term started, since last year there hasn't been any training, this year there hasn't been any training. Like I said there's a programme for those that were elected last year.

Facilitator: what are the burning issues within FAWU? What are they?

Respondent: It is mainly from the workers side, service

Facilitator: from which side?

Respondent: the side of the workers. Service, training, that they are not capacitated, they don't know how to deal with issues, the other challenge is the dismissals, they are very high, and then retrenchments also. I would say also the wages, the workers come with substantive issues – new agreements, workers are generally not happy with new agreements.

Facilitator: dismissals, are you able to deal with them? Or how does it work?

Respondent: I would say they are on a 50/50 scale, if you are representing a worker and he/she is not honest with his/her case things become difficult because I am going to prepare based on what the worker has told me and when we get to the bargaining council you get surprises. So that is the main challenge we are having. Workers do not understand that in order to represent them they need to be honest with you. The issue of training is also another problem, because some shop stewards have not being trained, most of the cases are messed up at plant level. So already

when the case is sent to the union office things, it is difficult to deal with the issue because there's been too many mistakes.

Facilitator: and why are the workers being dishonest in terms of their cases?

Respondent: I think the bottom line is money because most of the cases are theft. Workers feel they are not earning enough so they steal and go and sell. Most of the cases are theft. Others seem to think that they can do as they please because the union will represented they will not be dismissed

Facilitator: so that's how they think?

Respondent: Yes that's what they think that if they did something wrong the union will ensure that they are reinstated

Facilitator: so they are causing stress for you guys?

Respondent: of course they are

Facilitator: are there cases that are winnable?

Respondent: yes there are

Facilitator: based on what? What makes cases to be winnable and what makes you to lose cases?

Respondent: Like I said some of the cases are winnable if a worker did not commit the offence, or let's say we have enough time to prepare for the case, research and get more information about the case it helps the cases are winnable. Most winnable cases are those where they worker did not commit the offence and the worker is honest with us we are able to win the case. The case is not about whether the person has committed an offence or not, its about how you present your case, that is the main issue. Sometimes a guilty person can win a case if the representative is good, it's all about how the case is presented.

Facilitator: the role of the CCMA? It was not there before 1994 and now ..., has that made a difference in the lives of the workers?

Respondent: it has because CCMA is fully booked and they are doing their best, there are no more delays with CCMA cases. Most cases are settled within 90 days

Facilitator: Initially what caused the delay?

Respondent: I think it was administrative and manpower. CCMA has appointed more commissioners because there was an overflow of cases

Facilitator: Are you guys happy with the labour laws of today? Do you question them?

Respondent: The workers will never be happy with labour laws of today especially when it comes to labour brokage, that is a big issue. COSATU will be running a campaign on 5 October 2011 and there's going to be a mass stay away regarding the issue of labour brokers. Labour brokers affects workers because when I recruited workers into the union, in some cases it is difficult to identify who is the employer. Others are dealing nationally. For us to get the majority it is difficult for us to implement the process of introduction and everything – we will start from Gauteng and then learn that the company is nationally based. So that is the main issue now.

Facilitator: any other issue that is not satisfying the workers in terms of labour laws?

Respondent: Of course retrenchment is a problem for workers. Workers do not want to lose their jobs. If you look at the severance package they pay 1 week for each year completed. An employer has the power to retrench and pay a certain amount. Workers are not happy with this, nobody wants to lose their jobs. The other one is employment equity. The workers appreciate that the disadvantaged are taken into consideration but then the issue is about qualifications. Most workers are not qualified but they have the experience and the skill. If the employer is going to take qualifications into consideration, the workers will not qualify. That is why senior positions are still dominated by white males.

Facilitator: so there's nothing that you can do about it as the unions, or as FAWU?

Respondent: the only thing we can do about it is to engage the government, business, NEDLAC and as I already indicated the campaign of 5 October on labour brokers, for workers to take to the street because this is the only way workers can fight for their rights, through strike actions.

Facilitator: In terms of wage issues are you winning the fights, I noticed that some of the strikes have not been successful in the last few days for wages and so on. What is the condition at FAWU?

Respondent: FAWU has had many wage strikes, in the end the workers are forced to suspend the strike because they need to earn a living, if they are on strike for about a month they have no other income. Most FAWU members are lowly paid. For instance if a farm worker goes on strike, two days is very hard hitting for them. So for the worker to continue striking it becomes difficult, they are then forced to accept the percentage offered.

Facilitator: so does this mean that in terms of wage issues or wage negotiations has the situation become more tougher now taking into consideration that economic conditions are changing worldwide and so on?

Respondent: ja. They've become tougher especially after the recession. We are all saying the recession is over it is not. If you look at the inflation, the last time I checked it was around 4%, let's say for example if a worker is earning around R2300, and he gets an increase of 4%, what difference will that make? In most cases such workers have no other benefits, they only get the salary and the UIF deduction. So the 4% doesn't make a difference in their lives.

Facilitator: Personally has the labour market changed you in some ways or do you regret why you went there?

Respondent: I don't have regrets. I think for me going to the unions was a calling for me because I've enjoyed my work, the challenges I met, FAWU made me grow not

as a person but also as a woman. FAWU has empowered me as a woman. I know that when I leave FAWU I will be able to stand on my own two legs.

Facilitator: Talking about women issues and so on, are there some special programmes that are meant for women in this male dominated world and so on?

Respondent: Starting from COSATU and all affiliates of COSATU, all the second deputies deal with gender and we know that with gender there's a misconception that it is about women. Gender is about males and females because we want the males to support women in women empowerment. The programmes are very important. It is unfortunate that they programmes do not get anywhere because most men still consider gender equality as women's league and it is not. Men need to be involved in order to uplift women. So most of the time such initiatives fail – the programme is launched and then not taken forward, the programmes remain in the higher structures and do not reach the plants. So if the programme remains in the higher structure and does not get to the plants there is no impact to the women who needs to be empowered. It is still male dominated as far as I am concerned.

Facilitator: Is there anything that is going to be done about that or have you given up as women?

Respondent: No I think its important that we as women should also meet because we tend to have the pulling down syndrome which is killing us. If we as women do not get together and deal with these issues how on earth do we expect men to come join us and assist us.

Facilitator: are there women who are promising within the union, within FAWU, who have leadership skills and so on?

Respondent: Yes

Facilitator: have they succeeded to occupy senior positions or have you left them outside?

Respondent: we have had, I don't know if you know that most of the co-founder members of FAWU were women?

Facilitator: ja

Respondent: are you aware of that?

Facilitator: yes

Respondent: and even now we have a Second Deputy is a woman, Mama Elizabeth Manotho, even in our provinces there are women there and comrade Manotho is not the first woman to be a national office bearer. So in FAWU there are those women, even when coming to organisers, FAWU is very progressive when they employ organisers. Most organisers are not from outside, they are those who were groomed by FAWU to be organisers so that is how FAWU operates, it empowers women.

Facilitator: Have the men accepted that women are occupying the positions of power within FAWU, is it okay with them? Do they have the chauvinistic attitude?

Respondent: there's still the chauvinistic attitude, I will say 60% have accepted but then they are still, I remember there were some vacancies and the then provincial secretary was saying that, this was in our staff meeting, he was saying do we still need to employ female organisers. That was the question raised because they feel that we as females, irrespective of the kind of job you are doing, at the end of the day you are still a mother. You still have to go home, cook, wash and do all the housework that is done by women. They feel that this will somehow disturb the organisation's work. They are saying that us as women in some days are saying I won't be able to attend this meeting because I have to do some housework or because I have to look after my children but then at the end of the day it comes back to how much men are willing to assist us. If a woman is supported by her husband, for instance he cooks when she is at work or wash the kids and take them to bed we wouldn't be having these problems. If a woman has to do housework and be professional somehow she won't be able to commit to her work 100%. That is why we need men to support us in our fields of work.

Facilitator: The benefit for women at FAWU, issues around maternity leave and other things, are those things still a problem or ..?

Respondent: no

Facilitator: are they assured?

Respondent: In FAWU I must say as women we have the best conditions, when it comes to maternity leave we have six months paid leave.

Facilitator: the whole industry?

Respondent: I mean for us as staff

Facilitator: outside the staff, for members?

Respondent: with members its still a challenge. Most employers are sticking to the four months maternity leave as per the basic conditions act which is unpaid. That is why most women don't take four months maternity leave, they take one month and go back to work because the UIF money they pay is very little. And when a woman gives birth to a child the child needs a lot of money to be taken care of. So it's a challenge to most women.

Facilitator: do you have plans to address these issues?

Respondent: These issues, speaking from FAWU where there are wage and substantive negotiations they remain on the agenda of negotiations. Some companies would pay two months maternity leave and the rest of the months the employee claims from UIF. It remains a standing item on the list of demands.

Facilitator: But why is it so difficult to sort this thing out post 1994, one would expect that such things like maternity leave would have been sorted out by now, its 2011.

Respondent: As indicated earlier, we still do not have economic freedom. The company will say that is a cost to them, it is difficult for them to pay a person who does not come to work and they have to employ someone else in the person's

absence, it's a cost to them, its a burden to them. That is the problem we are having.

Facilitator: Strikes over the last few years have they been effective, FAWU strikes?

Respondent: ja, I would say they have been effective. The last strikes this year most of them were affecting merchandisers. I'm not sure whether you're aware that FAWU in this campaign recruits merchandisers, it is succeeding, this started from Gauteng Province and has spread nationally. This was one of the difficult sectors which FAWU has been trying to recruit without succeeding, it succeeded recently and FAWU has done well. There's been strikes this year. This is a victory to the workers although the sector seems small, companies are beginning to recognise the union. Generally merchandisers did not have union representation, all along they've been unorganised, now recently they are represented and have the benefit of being represented by a union.

Facilitator: You also went on to become an organiser, how did that happen?

Respondent: No they don't just choose you, we are democratic. The position was advertised in 2000 and like any other person I applied and went through the interview process.

Facilitator: what have been the challenges of being an organiser of FAWU?

Respondent: the challenges, they are so many. In the first instance the idea was to change the mindset of workers who felt that they will not be lead by a woman. I was very young at the time. Workers made comments like "she's a woman and still

very young". So that was my biggest challenge, it was a problem for me to stand in front of the workers and address them, mind you most of the members were men. So I had to change their thinking to show them that I am not just a woman I'm a comrade and am here to represent them and I have to work with them. It was so difficult it actually took years to change. The other issue of course was management, in most cases it was white males and they would look at me as this meek black woman – before I address them they would undermine me. I remember there was one instance, this particular company called our regional office and asked them why did they send a woman. So it was challenging from both sides the employers and members. The other disadvantage for a woman as an organiser is that most women are soft spoken. In the past regime when men were negotiating they would stand on tables, they thought it was a way to frighten the employer, so the workers expected the same from me and I told them that is not the way I do things. I told them we are going to sit around the table and talk like civilised people, facts on the table and proper negotiations – that's how we negotiate and resolve issues. So the way I preferred to operate made it difficult for me to convince the workers. The workers did not trust me because other organisers had disappointed them in the past, they had taken bribes from the employers so I told them that I am here to work not to take bribes. I asked them to trust me, and it was a challenge. The challenge is if they do not trust you they will conceal information from you not taking into consideration that if you negotiate without sufficient information they are holding you back. Those were some of the challenges.

Facilitator: what were your achievements so far as an organiser?

Respondent: The achievement so far, I would say I learnt to stand my ground, that is my personal achievement. From being an organiser in 2000 I've learnt so much from the organisation. I've learnt not only from my colleagues but also from the workers themselves – that in everything that you do you cannot achieve anything by yourself, you need a support group, it can either be your colleagues or the workers. So I learnt that should I leave FAWU I will always need some support group, one can

never say they know everything because in any organisation one learns something new everyday – working with people is a challenge because you have to deal with different characters and I've learnt how to deal with different characters. The other thing is patience, I've learnt to be patient in that others would come with their own opinions which I do not agree with – others would also come with their own political thinking, although we are an alliance with the ANC, other people within the organisation others still feel they are not members of the ANC and we are an alliance, one has to accommodate those kinds of people. So I think my greatest achievement in the past two years has been representing workers at the CCMA with big lawyers/attorneys/councillors and winning a case against them. That has been my biggest achievement, being able to engage them

Facilitator: where does your strength come from, have you studied law or are you good in words?

Respondent: I haven't studied law, like I said it's very important if you are in organisation you cannot say you know everything, it's very important to get advise and also its important to get reading material and research. The only course I attended was Principle Programme in Labour Studies and the course did not teach me anything related to being an organiser. It's more on HR Issues. So if you are in a union and have a support group – if you do not understand anything you need to have people that you can consult with who can give you the right advice. It doesn't necessarily have to be your colleagues, it can be people from other affiliates or the very same members who may have relevant information for you. So this is where I got my strength from. FAWU has been my home for 16 years

Facilitator: ja it's quite a long time, time flies. But do you see yourself remaining with FAWU in the next 16 years? What could be your next move? Maybe you are comfortable?

Respondent: It is said that the tongue is the one which can make your future to change if you want your future to change. In the past I had told myself that I will go on pension here at FAWU, because I love FAWU, life in FAWU there's been problems but I was able to overcome the problems. So I was thinking the Lord brought me to FAWU, to stay here and pension here, but things have changed, I might join the corporate world.

Facilitator: okay you've been ..(unclear)

Respondent: they've made me an offer

Facilitator: there's an opportunity, why not? But in terms of sustainability is it sustainable to join a union?

Respondent: yes it is

Facilitator: so you rely only on contributions from the members?

Respondent: No we have investments – if an organisation is going to rely on contributions from unions I don't it will survive. In those years unions survived on member contributions or subscriptions. Now life has changed, if you look at FAWU and the number of offices in the different regions, FAWU has to pay staff members of more than 100, there are people who depend on us. So there's no way an organisation can run purely on subscriptions. FAWU has investments so that the organisation has got a cash flow that is how the organisation is sustained.

Facilitator: The future of unions in this country, how do you see it?

Respondent: I think the unions will still exist if there are no changes to some of the labour laws, as indicated the biggest challenge is labour brokerage and the issue of retrenchments. Members will not feel safe knowing that they could be losing their jobs without them committing any offence. As long as the workers are working, with no benefits, or the wages are low, we will always have unions. The other big challenge faced by unions is that the youth as they start working they are difficult to recruit because they have no knowledge about unions. They do not understand the history of unions they believe they are educated and have the qualifications and have no interest in joining unions. They do not understand how they were able to get the positions, the campaigns, they don't know the history of unions, that people had to march, negotiations were held by organisations like NEDLAC, etc. It is a challenge to get the youth to join unions.

Facilitator: Talking about qualifications what works in unions, is it qualifications or experience?

Respondent: Now I will say what works better is the qualifications and experience. When I was appointed as an organiser what was taken into consideration was the fact that do I know and understand the labour laws? Do you have any experience in the organisation? But now even though unions are still non profit making, they need people who can engage management more than before. So the qualifications are a prerequisite.

Facilitator: This thing of losing members to parliament ..., because from time to time parliament draws from unions. Has that affected unions somehow or is it fine with you guys people can go?

Respondent: It's not actually losing members to parliament, most of the union leadership are deployed to parliament so its not losing. What COSATU is doing is that it is saying in deploying they believe this will make a difference to the workers. So what is happening is they are being deployed they do not go there on their own accord.

Facilitator: has the deployment benefited the unions or do they go there and forget about unions?

Respondent: Personally I would say no this has not benefited unions. COSATU deploys the leadership to go and represent issues but when they get there its another story, they represent themselves as individuals and no longer speak about workers issues.

Facilitator: so do you think this should be reviewed or should it just go ahead as planned?

Respondent: well I think it should be reviewed but then the question is how is it going to be done, maybe if there was some kind of legislation ..., lets say COSATU deploys someone to parliament and that person fails the unions COSATU should find a way of recalling that person maybe things will change because they will understand their mandate. They know that once they are in parliament they will not be recalled.

Facilitator: so they become comfortable

Respondent: Yes they are no longer answerable to COSATU

Facilitator: so if you had to live your life again what will you do?

Respondent: I think I will be in a union again because I don't regret – I have no regrets. I wanted to be a medical ..(unclear) and thank God I did not go there because I don't think I would have managed. I won't change anything in my life

Facilitator: so you are comfortable with this?

Respondent: yes

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

Respondent: I think its important .., I'm not sure if you covered this, those leaders who made FAWU what it is today, because when I look at the history of FAWU, it is very rich, most people do not know the history of FAWU. They do not know that FAWU is one of the founders of SADTU, they are not aware that FAWU deposed one of its leadership to be the first GS of SADTU. It is important for people to understand that history. People and workers need to know where FAWU comes from what impact is had in COSATU and the role it played in the formation of COSATU, what role it played during the UDN??, people look at FAWU on the surface they do not

know its history. FAWU has gone through its own challenges like any other organisation, FAWU has a strong rich history that people do not know of.

Facilitator: has anybody done something about that history? Maybe they talk about it when they are drunk and forget about it

Respondent: I don't know about that. What happened recently, the General Secretary has done some work on it because some of the leadership was honoured, buildings were bought and named after such people. That is something that has never happened in FAWU. I think its a start in the right direction – and it is not only the buildings, but also memorial lectures about the union veterans because they do not exist anymore – this should be done for those that still exist. I think the GS has started writing the history of FAWU.

Facilitator: you mentioned that FAWU went through its own challenges what kind of challenges were those?

Respondent: I don't know if I should comment on that. In the past years there's been of course leadership squabbles where FAWU did not concentrate on its work, the concentration was more on its squabbles, where financially it went down until we had this leadership .., (unclear) started when, I think it was around 2001, this is when FAWU became the FAWU that we know. It was mostly leadership squabbles, as you know if there's squabbles in an organisation, everything else falls apart.

Facilitator: everybody gets affected?

Respondent: yes

Facilitator: any closing word maybe?

Respondent: This is for FAWU, like I said FAWU has been my home for years and I don't regret ever being involved because I grew so much in FAWU and I've met great leaders in FAWU and FAWU has also opened doors for me. FAWU has in a way being not only part of my life but where my happiness lies. I always tell people that even though I grew so much in FAWU where there were times when I wanted to resign from FAWU but FAWU took me in when I was immature not in age but in thinking, immature mentally and all that and FAWU developed me to where I am today. So I love FAWU and I love unions and I wish people who have an interest in this kind of job to be committed and disciplined when they join the world of unions. That is my wish.

Facilitator: Thank you very much for your time.

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