

Sizwe Motha

Abstract

Sizwe Motha was born and schooled in Mpumalanga. He was active in Sasco while schooling in the early 1980s and later became an ANC activist. He left school in 1985, studied further to complete a diploma and was unemployed for a while in Gauteng. He returned to Mpumalanga in 1994 where he was employed in the public service. He soon joined Nehawu became a shop steward and rose in the ranks to become chairperson of the shop stewards in his workplace (branch) and later provincial chairperson. In 2011 he became Nehawu provincial secretary.

The interview provides a potted history of the formation of Nehawu. Massive public sector strikes in 1987 led to its formation with branch, regional and provincial structures being set up by the 1990s.

The early Nehawu focused on organising around bread and butter issues while the one post 1994 Motha believes "mobilised behind the vision crafted by liberation movements" – Nehawu wanted its members to support the new democratic state. By 2012, the 'born frees' he says dominate the union and are more concerned with wanting the union to secure better pay and to defend them at work if they are disciplined. Nevertheless the union is also attempting to rebuild the consciousness of workers to support the ANC state in their public service jobs.

The major focus of Nehawu in 2012 is to try and secure parity of pay across grades and provinces which was not the case at the time of the interview.

This is an interview with Sizwe Motha, we are in Nelspruit, the date is 3 August 2012. Interview is done by Brown Maaba. Comrade you were saying that NEHAWU started in which year and how it came about to be in the province?

Respondent: NEHAWU came into the province in the late 1980s, you know that NEHAWU was established in 1987, when it had its first congress, national congress was in 1987 and subsequently it established provincial structures. In the province, and you would know that NEHAWU came about, how NEHAWU launched itself was through a public service strike, massive public service strike as part of the ANC's call

to render the country ungovernable in 1986. So from 1987 there were massive public service strikes in hospitals, nurses were on strike and other sectors of the public service as well. So in the province we had one of the biggest hospitals in Themba as well as Robs, although Robs to a lesser extent because Rob Ferreira Hospital was a former white hospital. As you know it is located in Nelspruit, Nelspruit was a formerly white area. So Themba Hospital in Kabokweni was a central point where the demonstrations and the strike action was located in the Lowveld and in the Highveld around the area of Kwa-Ndebele, around Kwa-Mhlanga Hospital. Well this thing developed later to include the other sectors of the public service, in particular your state administration, your social development and others which joined in. And again the area of Kwa-Ndebele was very central. You know that we were having two homeland systems in the province, Kwa-Ndebele and Ka-Ngwane. So the area of Kwa-Ndebele you had a large part of mobilisation around government complex in Kwa-Ndebele as well as here in the Lowveld. There was a large mobilisation of public service as I said around Themba Hospital and the large parts of the administration of the former two homelands.

Now that's how NEHAWU came in in the late 1980s. And in the 1990s, it was now fully fledged, we had fully established structures that are functioning. I said earlier informally that there's one old man by the name of Baba Bembe. He is very crucial in terms of the history, particularly the history from the late 1980s up until the early 1990s because he is the one who was crucially establishing structures at that time. He was playing an organising role in the union, trying to mobilise structures, establish structures, all around the province, defending members during the public service strike and all those things, so he's very crucial.

Then as I said in the early 1990s, structures were established. We had what we called then, what we now call as provincial structures, we were referring to them as regional structures, Mpumalanga and the rest of the other province were regarded as regions of NEHAWU. Then you would have what we now call as branches was a branch in the sense of .., it will cover an area of from Nkomazi coming from what we now have as Mbombela in the municipalities, Nkomazi, Mbombela, Umjindi as well

as parts of Albert Luthuli. In fact the entire Albert Luthuli because it would include the areas of Nhlazatshe and Songimvelo and around Carolina. That was a branch where you had .., it was led by four people, chair, deputy chair, treasurer and secretary. They were co-ordinating the work of the union themselves and there would be two officials, an organiser and an administrator manning the office. So we had three of those branches, one was here, the other one was around the area of Ekangala, the other one was around the area of Gert Sibande.

This arrangement continued like that up until in the year 2000, when our structures were realigned and we .., what we had as regions, provinces were converted into provincial structures. And in a way this followed what the broader movement was, the shape of what the movement took, because we know that the ANC also regarded provinces as regional structures and in the late, early 1990s, they converted them into provinces. So ourselves too around 2000 we changed and they converted what we referred as regions to be provincial structures and then brought it another layer in between to be the regional structures where we had three regional structures around the three district municipalities which is Ehlanzeni, Ekangala and Gert Sibande and then brought it what we now then called branches, which branches are co-ordinating at a particular department level, per department as a branch, or at a hospital there would be a branch like Rob Ferreira, Themba Hospital. And in a way that strengthened the union because you now had more enlarged structures which are able to link up with members and interact with members, get everything that members .., be it concerns or whatever they had as a grievance that must be addressed. Unlike in the past where you would have fewer structures and which required that the few comrades that are there were required to reach as much members as possible. But you will .., we must be honest that the character and the attitude of the former leaders was different from what we have now because those ones were working to a large extent without the resources that we now have a union. They would not complain like we do now, we are funded if you are to go to service a member, go somewhere the union will pay for your transportation and to do all those things. And at some point you will be accorded money to buy lunch and all those things. Those former leaders were doing this thing out of passion because there was less resources at the time. They would be able to

cover a large area without being compensated at times. Many of them did not have cars, they would use public transport to go and service members and do all those things. So I think it's different, we now have bigger structures, more people to .., more leaders and union officials because immediately after we set up regional structures, each regional structure had officials, organisers, whose role is to go to branches, organise and recruit members and attend to members' grievances, those that are charged, attend to their disciplinary cases and those that are having grievances, lodge those grievances, attend to them up to the level where they are satisfactorily attended to.

Each region currently we have two organisers per region and an administrator and elected political leaders in each region, which are four and then you have a province, a province as .., here in this office we have seven officials, apart from the elected leadership, we have seven officials. One is responsible for education, co-ordinating the education of our members and shop stewards. The other one is the overall head of the organisers in the province and the other one is solely dealing with para legal matters, issues of disciplinary cases and grievances, co-ordinating those matters. And the other one is dealing with our finances, management of our finances. You will know that .., as I said that we have resources now, we have our allocation every month that comes from head office to each province. So that money must be managed properly, otherwise you run the risk of some mismanagement. So there's an official who's responsibility is solely is to manage the finances of the union, accountable to the secretary. Then there's the provincial administrator who's role is just to deal with the administration of the province, and a cleaner. So that is the staff complement. Of course the provincial secretary is referred to as the accounting officer of the union in the province because his role is to be the head of the administration. Every official in the union, in the province is accountable to the provincial secretary, who in turn accounts on behalf of the province to head office. And he is also responsible as the driver of all the union programmes, be it decisions of the national congress, the central executive committee which sits annually or the NEC which sits twice a year or the provincial executive committees which are convened quarterly. So his role really is to make sure that there's a programme to implement those decisions and make sure that

follow ups are made that those decisions are implemented, and account to constitutional structures in terms of implementation of those decisions.

I can say that there's a massive growth of the union. In the past I think the union was .., I wouldn't say past as in the late 1980s or early 1990s, somewhere in the mid 1990s and late 1990s, the union was as low as less than your 10 000 members or something. But we have now grown to a massive 26 000 members and this to some extent speak to the manner in which we are able to appeal to the public servants out there.

Facilitator: And yourself how did you end up in NEHAWU?

Respondent: Well I was employed in the public service in 1994 and of course I was an activist of the ANC and when I came in comrades recruited me to NEHAWU and of course there is this thing that in the public service, particularly in this sector that we are organising, you had your public administration association, which is PSA and NEHAWU and we know the history of PSA, PSA has been largely a brainchild of the apartheid regime. So when I came in in the public service, it became automatic to join NEHAWU, so I became a member of NEHAWU in 1994. I started to lead in 1996 in the branch. I was part of the leadership of the branch, without a key position, but in 1997 when we went to another branch congress, I was elected as the secretary in 1997. And it's a position that I held up until 1999 when I was elected as the chairperson of the branch. And when you are a chairperson or a secretary you become part of the .., what we previously called as the branch executive committee which scratched the areas which I outlined earlier, your Inkomazi, Mbombela, Mjindi and Albert Luthuli, what we now call as a region, which is the regional executive committee. So I was then part of that structure up until 2006 when I was elected as the chairperson of the region of Ehlanzeni 2006. In 2009 I was elected as the provincial chairperson of NEHAWU and the situation changed in 2011, I was elected as a provincial secretary.

Facilitator: Were you involved in politics at school, when you were at secondary school?

Respondent: Yes I was part of the student movement structures SASCO.

Facilitator: That's where your politics started?

Respondent: That's where it started but in the main I must be honest that we were part of a generation that were mobilised, you will know that after the unbanning?? (banning) of the ANC in the 1960s, which in around 1985 the formation of the UDF, there were structures of what you then called South African Youth Congress, which structures were formed in every locality, you would have a Matsulu Youth Congress, you would have a Nelspruit Youth Congress. So I was part of that generation of .., I was part of a Matsulu Youth Congress which was of course not directly linked to the ANC but were able, through underground work get some information, and do some mobilisation for the organisation as part of the liberation forces. Ja I was without occupying any position of course, I was not occupying any position but I was part of those structures that were mobilising for the liberation of the country which is why I said it was automatic to when I came to the union to be recruited and joined the union and be part of the structures.

Facilitator: What were your exact plans after Matric or something, did you want to go straight into a workplace or you wanted to go to university or you just stumbled upon unions?

Respondent: Ja well I must be honest, union I never thought of being in a union structures and being leading and .., it never crossed my mind. But you know we, particularly our generation, unlike now opportunities were not as open as they are now because I .., even though I came in in 1994 in the union, I was not directly from

school at that time. There were some years which I had matriculated and tried attempts to go to university, tried to go to some higher education institutions which I failed, and which then I tried different employment opportunities, some of them were part time and broadly the earlier parts of 1985 were times spent idling if I can call it that way because there would be piece jobs, you would do this, come back and being unemployed and do this and that. I spent some time in Gauteng. I have a relative in Soweto, so I spent a large part of .., a good couple of years there trying to secure employment and at that time, you know with the industrialisation, everything was centralised in these big cities, your Johannesburg, Durban, Pretoria, Cape Town and whatever, so we were part of those, I was part of the young people who went to Johannesburg looking for job opportunities but unfortunately with the stringent measures of the regime, then there were part of this thing of the Group Areas Act and stuff, we were not able to secure permanent employment opportunities because we were said to be from the Bantustans. So we couldn't secure jobs. So ja, then I came back home. My passion was to go to school, I had a passion to go to school which is why I then ended up registering on my own around late 1995 and I secured my diploma. I registered with what we now call Tshwane University of Technology, then it was Pretoria Technikon. I was doing evening classes, I managed to secure a diploma hence subsequently I did some other studies. I attempted an MBA with Natal University and unfortunately these accreditation by the Council of Higher Education they were not allowed to ..(unclear) because we were attending in Johannesburg instead of Durban. So part of this, what you call this Provincial Accreditation required that we must go and attend in Durban. So I couldn't continue. I just left, exited at first level and secured a diploma. So ja, but that's all. But I am continuing with my studies with Unisa.

Facilitator: So your impression of NEHAWU when you joined, what kind of union was it?

Respondent: Ja well, NEHAWU was .., I must be honest that the ..., maybe different from now to some extent. But NEHAWU then, it was not solely a union that exist, that was established rather, solely for purposes of organising workers for the shop floor

issues. What we refer to as bread and butter issues. Of course that becomes fundamental to any union that your key existence is to service your members and advance their interest and the aspirations but then defend the job security and stuff. But because of a particular political environment, the sense that I got was that NEHAWU was established primarily to ensure that this large contingent of workers, public sector workers are mobilised behind the vision that was crafted by the liberation movements, in particular the ANC for the liberation of the country, mobilise the people so that as their public servants serving the system, because in the main when you are a public servant, you are serving the system of the day. You are advancing the system, in terms of everything that you do, you making sure that the state must continue to advance and grow and entrench its existence. So, my sense that I got was that NEHAWU was formed to make sure that workers as they do that, as they are mobilised they understand the bigger picture. Ja which is, I do think even now, although the consciousness to some level has minimised possibly because we now large part also of young workers who do not know anything about the apartheid and the conditions that people were subjected to prior 1994 and of course, they are referred to as born frees. So they don't know anything or they want .., in fact to them a union will only be relevant for as long as the day she/he is charged or has a grievance and that's it and the annual wage negotiations which will secure an increase for them and that's it. And they would not be part of the day to day structures and recognise the importance of having a structure called the union. So that's where the difference is. Then you had a highly conscientised contingent of workers who knew exactly why they must build the union and the importance of the struggle and everything. So there's a change now, at a time when we must say now as public servants be conscious that we're working for our own democratic state and the things we do, we must do them with passion because they serve our own population where we coming from. If you are a nurse you're serving the poor masses who can't afford private medical health. And ja, so the rest ja, difference. So that's the impression that I have with NEHAWU but we battling as I said earlier, we have an education programme where we, as part of this building this consciousness, we bring this education programme. But also not necessarily political education. But we also dealing with the enhancing skills of our members, what we call skills development programmes within the union. Conscientise our members on the different legislations, in particular the Skills

Development Act, the importance of them being vigilant on matters of skills development in their workplaces, that the different in the departments, they must make sure that there are skills development programmes as we know that skills development requires that there must be workplace skills plan every year which would be followed in terms of skilling, up-skilling the officials in terms of to close the skills gaps that we have in the country. Ja. So ja that's what we do.

Facilitator: Ja and what has been the pressing shop floor issues for NEHAWU in this province?

Respondent: Well the .., I can say that first and foremost the .., you know that the .., which is a matter that we now battling with at the level of the .., at the Bargaining Council with the employer and we have secured an agreement with the employer to do what we call a review of the remuneration policy within the public service. That thing to us, is a major grievance in the province. It will address what we now have, where you have, in the province for example, you have discrepancies in terms of the remuneration skills in the different provinces, what Limpopo would pay for the same level of a, for the same rank of official would be different from what Mpumalanga pays and vis a vis what Gauteng will pay. So we know that in the province we are the lowest ranked officials, equally ranked but lowest in salary scale. Now that thing was experienced practically when government took a decision to transfer or review its demarcation and bring Bushbuckridge back to Mpumalanga, you know that in the late 1990s Bushbuckridge was taken to Limpopo and then now around .., when was it, around 2007 or so, Bushbuckridge was brought back after some massive protestation. (phone rang). So Bushbuckridge was brought back into the province. That thing was experienced first-hand because those people who were coming from Limpopo, their salary scales were extremely high. So that's a major grievance in the province if I may indicate the issue of salary scales that is why we have now come up with an agreement, collective agreement as part of this year's collective agreement on salaries to review the remuneration policy so that you standardise the issue of remuneration across the public service. Those would be our major .., of course some of the other pressing issues which be

issues of, which I assume those will affect generally all other provinces, the issue of your working conditions, particularly in public health, in hospital and in cleaning. Your shortage of nurses. You know that Europe is poaching and the middle east is poaching our health professionals. So that thing brings about shortage of staff and that talks to the working conditions and all those things. Those would be some of the grievances which by the way as I said it will affect, in my view the other provinces as well. I do think so.

Facilitator: Issues around exploitation in this sector of NEHAWU, are there such experiences?

Respondent: Exploitation in which sense?

Facilitator: Well in the building industry for instance, workers work overtime, they work over the weekends without being paid and so on?

Respondent: Well in our sector, except for the sectors that are private like we organise your private institutions such as your private social development institution. Your private welfare such as your old age homes, your orphanage homes and whatever, some of those. There, there would be some areas of some exploitation. But within the public service there's .., that is, if it happens is very minimal because you dealing with a sector that is highly regulated.

Facilitator: So you don't have these kinds of problems per se?

Respondent: No, not exploitation as such.

Facilitator: And the bargaining council, are you guys, is it effective?

Respondent: Ja it is effective except that you sometimes experience some bullying tactics of the employer, in a sense that the employer would not .., would come with some delaying tactics in terms of getting things done, where you would have an agreement and that agreement is not implemented and it will take some time and government will come with some excuses, and will come and shift goal post and in the next round of negotiations ask for another extension and all manner of things. And in some instances, particularly on matters of salaries, the employer will come and tell you straight, we giving you straight this much and nothing more, nothing less and which is what I refer to as bullying tactics. But otherwise, it is effective. It does work because I don't think outside it we would have been able to secure some of the things that we are securing. (interruption)

Facilitator: Any other challenges that are faced by NEHAWU in this province?

Respondent: At the level of relations with the employer or?

Facilitator: Yes

Respondent: Ja well those .., like the issue of the salary disparities is a major issue that I've raised but generally we can say that we do think that there's a need for better improvement on relations with the provincial administration. Regular interaction, even though there's an interaction at the level because what you have as bargaining councils, there are provincial legs of those .., you have different chambers at the level of the provinces where such is taking place and where you have reached an agreement is referred to the council at a national level for ratification to be a formal agreement and stuff. But I think there's a need to enhance relations between ourselves and the provincial administration so that some

of the things that ordinarily may later become problems, are able to be tackled and we find some agreement. So that's what I do think that requires improvement. (pause).

Recording

continued:

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

Respondent: Ja well I think if we were to have another session and then I bring comrade Bembe that would be beneficial to your project. But from my side, ja, I think you have gathered almost everything that we would have indicated. Except that maybe ja, maybe part of .., because you see unions are operating or existing within a particular socio political environment. So you know that in the country currently we battling with this thing, in fact we're struggling to ensure that our country is fully non racial and hopefully non sexist particularly the non sexist part, particularly with the issue of gender mainstreaming and the empowerment of women. I do think that we still have a long way to go ourselves as unions, as in building the capacity of women leaders and make sure that they themselves also occupy central positions. We are doing well though there are good efforts that are being brought in but I think there's still space for much improvement in that aspect because I think we can, we have a potential to contribute in that aspect to make sure that we build women leadership because many of the sectors that we organise, you know that nurses predominantly are women. Your social workers predominantly are women, and even in the normal state administration you have largely women by virtue of them being in large numbers in the society so I do think that that's an area that there's room for improvement in my view.

Facilitator: Thanks for your time mfowethu. Is it possible that I can see baba Bembe.

END