

Funky Komape

Facilitator: This is an interview with Fanky Komape, we are in Kempton Park, the date is 6 May 2012 interview is done by Brown Maaba. You can go either way, Zulu, English, Sotho, please give me a background of where you were raised, your family background, schooling, education and how you ended up in the world of unions?

Respondent: I was born in Edenvale and we moved to Thembisa, I was born in 1961, we moved to Thembisa and I studied in Thembisa, I subsequently went to study in Limpopo and I then came back to Jo'burg once more and studied at what used to be Tumelong which was called a Junior, Tumelong Secondary it was called a Junior that's where I studied and when I left school at the time I was a student I had not completed my Matric. I then went to go and work in the industrial areas, I worked for metal companies for a while and I then worked for a company in the printing industry called Colour Lab in Isando, this is where I worked for quite some time. I could not finish my high school studies, I left school at Standard 9, I stayed home for a while without Matric until I worked for Dairy Belle in Clayville. That's where I got involved with the trade union movement. When I arrived there we were firstly employed as ..., the company originated from Jo'burg and Pretoria and brought its old employees, we were employed as the residents of Thembisa, there were a number of unions involved in the company. They had the following unions: NUDI, Food and Beverage and Food and Canning unions. What used to happen in those days is that after a company has employed you, you had to go to the pass office, and also get a stamp from the Department of Labour etc., and Dairy Belle also had to put their stamp there. The problem arose when we were supposed to be paid, the problems started. We asked them if this was the money they are paying us, the employers for some reason did not know how much we were supposed to be paid as labourers. Because of the problem we decided to join the unions. We fought for a better salary, there was about five of us from Thembisa

Facilitator: so for only five?

Respondent: yes, at that time, we came as a group, but there would be many other people employed at a different time, we were employed at the same, we were the ones who complained about our salary. We had a problem with the salary they were paying. So when we asked people in those days they would say these people do not pay much and they would not tell us how much they were being paid – they did not want to disclose what they were being paid. So we then decided to join the union, we did some research about the unions. I found that the guy who was the secretary for Food and Canning was from, I had the opportunity to meet Israel Mokgatle who was the branch secretary. He came from Thembisa and gave me some background about the union and then I asked the guys that we join the union. We joined the union, Food and Canning, I think it was around .., just prior to the launch of COSATU it was around 1982. I was an ordinary member for a while then one day we had a shop steward who represented us at a conference, when he came back, his name was Joe Mokholoane, he was from Pretoria. When he came back he was now employed as a supervisor, he used to be chairperson of the shop stewards, we don't know what happened.

There were other shop stewards who were elected. I was elected as a shop steward because of circumstances at the time. We were on strike, we went on a stoppage, during the stoppage, the employer employed coloured workers from Eersterust to come and work there. We decided that we are going to organise the workers, the employer wanted to divide us, so we organised the coloured workers – before I became a shop steward I had organised workers to belong to one union not three different unions. Nudi was left with key people like supervisors, we made sure that all ordinary workers joined Food and Canning, the members from Food Bev joined Food and Canning, we united workers into one union.

Facilitator: what was special about Food and Canning?

Respondent: What I had learnt at the time, I was given books to read, historically the union originated from the congress tradition, it used to be an affiliate of SACTU at the time, we were given material to read and we also checked the people who were founders of the union ..., one of the founders was a woman, Ria Alexandra and she was a communist and so on. So these things inspired us to join Food and Canning. It was one of the trade unions that were not only concerned with bread and butter issues, it also took the struggle of the workers outside the factory floor, took an interest in community matters, historically it had been involved in some boycotts, we learnt about other strikes such as Fattis and Monis boycotts etc., such things made us believe that the union is relevant. That was one of the special things about the union.

At one stage a worker was dismissed, that is how I became a shop steward, Sammy Sebothoma, he was from Thembisa, he was a young man. He had studied up to Standard 5 or so, he couldn't read and write although he had been to school, he could not read English and express himself in English. Shop stewards called us to a meeting to report that ..., before Sammy's incident, there was a situation whereby workers were called ..., the company wanted to replace ..., the coloured workers I referred to, the divide they wanted to make. We organised the first group of coloured women whom we organised into the union, they brought men from Eerterust, the employer wanted the coloured men to replace the ladies as operators and get the ladies to be sweepers and clean the machines, the strategy was to train them so that they can take over as operators. We mobilised the workers and I told them to protest against this. The following day we planned, we asked everyone to rise against this, to say if the guys operate we all don't work because the ladies cannot be sweepers and be cleaners. I came and listened from behind and found that there was a meeting and there was a production manager intimidating the workers saying "what is it that they want, they must go back to work because this does not concern them". I then spoke and said it does concern us. He then said let everyone go back to work and that the guys which they were going to use as replacements will be collected and paid. An agreement was reached that everybody will go back to work and the chaps will be paid out and will no longer be allowed to come back. The manager then wanted to recruit me to become a

supervisor, he said I can speak to workers, he can make me a supervisor and buy me a house. I told him that I'm not going to be a supervisor, when I first came here nobody bothered to find out what my education level is, although I did not have Matric but it was not an issue, I told him I'm happy to continue with the workers and be part of them, I am not interested in becoming a supervisor, they have a union and the union is there to talk for them, so they don't need me to become a supervisor to talk on their behalf. So that did not materialise.

Then this Sammy Sebothoma's incident started. The shop stewards explained to us that he has been absent from work for two/three days and when he came back he was asked to sign something, "I resign on my own accord"- the shop stewards briefed us during lunch time, they told us that the case is difficult and that they tried to talk to management – we all asked questions. Some felt that it was not acceptable, management should be approached. A guy called John Mafa from Soweto volunteered to accompany those that were going to talk to management. At the eleventh hour I decided to join them. I did not say it publicly that I'm going to join them, I just wanted to observe what would happen and what the difficulty was on the matter. So I joined the matter.

The first thing that happened, the general manager Mr Waldeck and his team came in and saw me, they asked me if I am also a shop steward, I said yes but I was not. They then asked the chairperson of the shop stewards Ali, he said yes it's true. They then asked for the list of the shop stewards. They then asked what is the problem, I spoke, I told them that we want to understand how on earth this poor worker, who cannot read and write state that he is resigning on his own accord. He couldn't read and write, and secondly we wanted to know why was this done in the absence of the shop steward. We felt that it was unfair and we were challenging the company that he did not know what he was signing for, there's no way he can write such a statement. The case did not take long. They then asked us to go and find the worker, bring him back and that they will pay him from the time he was dismissed. The case was then closed. We then asked the worker to come back to work. In his mind he thought he had signed a warning for being absent from work,

he didn't realise he was resigning. The next problem was with me now, the general manager thinks I'm a shop steward of which I'm not, the second problem I didn't go back to work when I was supposed to after lunch. Nobody knew where I was because I did not inform the other workers that I will be joining the team that was going to negotiate with management.

We met and discussed quickly, we then resolved that according to the recognition agreement and the constitution of the union they're supposed to have 8 committee members, at the time they had 7 not 8, so there was a vacancy which I was asked to fill. So automatically I fit into the picture. We then reported back to workers that Sammy will be returned to work and that Fanky is now a shop steward because management thinks Fanky is a shop steward. The workers had no problem that is how I became a shop steward.

I then became actively involved because I had no choice, learnt a lot about union history and all those things, started attending union meetings outside the office etc., attended shop steward councils etc., I was actively involved now. Then it was election time, I was elected as the Vice Chairperson. I became the vice chairperson. Then there was a Food and Canning Conference in Cape Town, it was the first conference I attended. Around 1983/84, prior to COSATU being launched, the conference was in Woodstark, Athlone, Cape Town. I participated and remember there was a debate whether we as a trade union should concentrate only on the worker struggles, shop floor issues or whether we should get involved when there are issues which affect workers outside the workplace, community issues, CIVIC matters etc., working hand in hand with CIVIC organisations when there are things like rent boycotts, those type of issues. I intervened and recommended that we cannot just be a union dealing with bread and butter issues, we have to be involved in the struggle, the struggle of the workers does not stop on shop floor matters, it's pointless for us to fight for good wages in the workplace whereas the municipalities and other government institutions increase services, rates and taxes etc., that we needed to engage with such institutions so that our struggle is not fruitless. We should get involved with such institutions because we are not

represented in such forums. So we believed that we should get involved in community issues. We then resolved that the union will be actively involved in community struggles too which affect our members, and also we should work with political formations like UDF etc. The resolution was taken at that conference. I was later nominated to attend the meeting on Unity Talks in Wilgespruit. We went there during the preparation time, this is when the idea of One Federation in the country, that then led to the Durban Launch of COSATU in December 1985. I was part of the delegation representing Food and Canning. The Food unions collaborated in terms of working together, Sweet Food, we worked together although we had not merged but we collaborated and then COSATU was launched. A number of leaders were elected including Chris Dlamini who became the vice president, he came from Sweet Food, which was our union because we were already in the Unity Talks mode, we knew we had to merge one way or another, Food and Canning and Sweet Food. Jay Naidoo was elected as the General Secretary of COSATU, previously he was the General Secretary of Sweet Food. Elija Bagai was elected as the president, Sydney Mufamadi as the deputy general secretary, I think Makhulo Ledwaba as the Treasurer.

After the conference we had to translate what happened at national level to regions, we had to start forming COSATU regions at the same time implementing the resolution of COSATU: One Union One Industry. So there were a lot of challenges and we were very busy, this happened during the height of apartheid, things were difficult in those days. In 1986 FAWU was formed (interruption) – so in June I think 1986 we managed to .., we are the first I would say affiliate of COSATU because we were part of the formation, we formed COSATU, One Country One Federation slogan and one Union One Industry. We had to go back and do some work. We had to work with general unions like GAWU, SAWU, to try to get the membership which belong to us, for instance food workers who are in their fold. We had to work at bringing them out of the unions they were affiliated to into our unions. There were a number of workers for example I remember from SAAWU which we had to move into our union which is Food and Canning at the time but obviously we were already working together, Food and Canning, Sweet Food and RAAU, those were the three main, well organised, they were not general unions, they were focussed in the food

industry, the others were general, like GAWU, SAAWU and many others (interruption) .., so what happened is in June there was a successful merger between Sweet Food and Allied Workers Union, Food and Canning Workers Union and RAWU. I will tell you one thing I forgot to mention, about the conference I attended of Food and Canning, the one I referred to. You see at the time the union was .., I remember the membership card was red, membership was reflecting Food and Canning and African Food and Canning, it was because of how apartheid was designed so that unions cannot organise across racial lines, it's supposed to be only black workers, whites and coloureds separately. But there was one interesting thing I noticed at the congress. We would have one conference and elect the leadership, keep two sets of minutes for African Food and Canning and for Food and Canning but it's the same union, operate it as the same union and we had one general secretary. What they would try to do is the African Food and Canning would seem to be only black leadership and so on in terms of books and records but practically it's the same leadership and for whites as well you will see as if it's only those whites and coloureds, we have one conference, we don't have African Food and Canning having their meetings separate, Food and Canning having their meetings separate. This striked me because it made me understand how evil apartheid was, unions were forced to separate how the unions were supposed to organise themselves, workers were not supposed to be organised in one company, workers were not allowed to join one union.

Coming back to what happened, we managed to continue and we overcome them, we ignored those things. I remember that Food and Canning was one of those unions which refused to participate in the Industrial Councils, we were not registered or participated in any industrial councils, we were bargaining directly with employers.

Facilitator: why were you refusing to be part of Industrial Councils?

Respondent: We realised that Industrial Councils were a waste of time because they were an extension of the employers to us, it was a waste of time, we knew that whatever we wanted to do there is just to rubber stamp what the employers wanted to do, it's not going to necessarily do anything which will benefit workers, so why should we participate in that kind of structure, and we were part of the structures of apartheid in any event. So we didn't want to participate in those structures and we successfully never did that, we fought against it and we decided we not going to do that and we have never been any part of the so-called Industrial Council until probably they were abolished.

So remember in those days one was getting more involved and learning about trade unions, I started as a shop steward. I began to get involved, I became an office bearer in maybe this branch and so on. So in 1986 ..., actually the formation of FAWU, I was now full time. What happened is after the COSATU launch, a year later 1986 around April, we went on a strike here at Dairy Belle, the strike lasted for about three weeks. The resolution was that a case against myself, the Chairperson, and the secretary was taken to arbitration at IMSA. We went to IMSA, it was alleged that we beat some skilled labourers and some of the managers during the strike or when we returned, I don't remember when was the allegation but it's around that, that we beat those people. We went to arbitration, myself and the chairperson we lost the case, they paid us compensation, I think the secretary was reinstated. I don't remember whether it was the chairperson or secretary, I was not reinstated, I was fired, myself and one of the two. But then the union, because they realised that .., we were represented by our general secretary Jan Theron in the case, he was disappointed when he lost the case, then they told the guys in the branch that they must employ me as a branch organiser. In those times we were not employed us based on our CV's etc., the BC made a decision if they felt you were the right activist and met the criteria, that kind of thing, they took a decision in the branch that we are employing this guy he will be our organiser. I remember on Wednesdays we used to have what is called Shop Steward Council so the Shop Steward Council was turning to the BC and the guys from Sweet Food because we were already having these unity talks, and we were having joint Shop Steward Councils they were told no they can't participate on the issue it's only Food and Canning guys who are

going to deliberate on that issue, they must make a decision and myself and those Sweet Food guys will be outside then they made a decision to employ me as the branch organiser. I became the branch organiser in 1986. We went to Cape Town, we arrive in Cape Town, some workers are on strike. I think it was Epic Oil if I'm not mistaken, workers had been on strike. I remember the general secretary wanting me to fly and go back and I said I'm a new organiser there are many other organisers who work in the union why are they not going to handle the strike – I said I'm not going I can't leave the conference and go to a strike. We dealt with the issues of conference and we elected new leadership, Chris Dlamini was elected the president of FAWU, remember in COSATU he was the deputy president, first vice president and now he's elected the president of FAWU then General Secretary was Jan Theron, Mike Madlala was elected the deputy general secretary at that conference or assistant general secretary as the term we used and Peter Malepe was the Vice President and Ivan Perera was the Treasurer General if I remember but those are the people I remember. Then but we .., there were other guys obviously who came from other unions like Allen Roberts was the former general secretary of RAU but he was absorbed into the union as one of the national negotiators in the union.

I then worked as a branch organiser from then at the Kempton Park branch. After some years I became the branch secretary, obviously one was active in community issues and we ..., also involved in COSATU, remember at the time we had to form COSATU region, we were participating under what used to be called COSATU Wits Region. We formed that region of COSATU and we participated there as people who represented the union and we had been actively there in all congresses of the Wits Region, Shop Steward Councils or Wits region and so on. I then, subsequent to that, in 1993 there was another FAWU conference. There had been a number of conferences. There was another one in Durban, one attended many conferences subsequent to 1986, there was one conference in Durban/Westville where we removed the leadership

Facilitator: of FAWU?

Respondent: ja, certain people I wouldn't say all of them. What happened was, there was an issue, there were issues of principle, I remember I was a member of the Communist Party already by then, that was 1993 conference. This conference is very important because what happened is, Glen Mokwena came to our conference, dismissed .., our argument was not whether he is correctly or incorrectly dismissed, the issue was the conference was not a platform to deal with disciplinary issues, it's not an appeal hearing or whatever, if somebody is dismissed by the branch they must follow the procedures and all that, we came here as a region, with the bus, he came with his delegation in a kombi and he is dismissed, he is now dividing us .., he is dividing workers further, he came with his delegation, certain delegation came with us as the region, the branch is already divided into two going to that conference. We were debating that issue for more than 2.5 days not reaching agreement. I remember at one stage Chris was chairing, requesting the officials to go out of the conference, the workers will still come and consult us, we showed them what the conditions are, they go back and argue and we had to go back into the conference, but all that irritated workers because the leadership was not being decisive, or giving direction. They failed to do that, workers were angered obviously, then we decided we are going to campaign openly against these kinds of leaders who did this, we were aware who are the people and we sort of worked against the president which was Chris, the assistant general secretary was Figo, Mike Madlala and the second vice president which was Thoko Magagula that we are removing these people because we believed they are not giving leadership, they are not helping us. We removed them in the conference. Chris Dlamini was removed and replaced by a gentleman called Ernest Theron, a coloured guy, we argued that this union is the union of workers, it's a multi racial union and it has history that even coloured people led this union before, like Frank Mcguard, they were there historically they led the union. So people who want to begin believing that a coloured cannot lead it he doesn't understand the struggle of the workers and history particularly of the food workers, that the majority of the .., the origin of this union started in the Food and Canning, in the canning industry in the Western Cape, so by default most of its leadership started there and it will by in large be coloureds. And we argued that it's not about .., we understand that our struggle is a non racial struggle and therefore we are a non racial trade union movement,

there's nothing wrong with that comrade. Whether people believe he is maybe not politically active, he is not equated to Chris Dlamini, to us that was not an issue – the first vice president we wanted to take over refused to stand against Chris, Peter Malepe refused to stand against Christ, the man who was ready to take over we said fine we will support you and then he took over. Mandla Xanyane at the time was the general secretary already and we replaced Figo with Earnest Buthelezi who became the Deputy General Secretary at the conference in 1993. Thereafter we're supposed to come back to the region and elect new leadership, one other thing that happened is Ernest who is now the regional secretary has been deployed to head office and all that, there were a number of challenges obviously, a lot of in fighting, people trying to stop the conference not to go ahead, we had to get MK comrades to come and assist with the security for the conference etc., but eventually things went ahead. I was then elected the regional secretary of FAWU Transvaal in 1993, at the time we had no provinces the region was called Transvaal, Transvaal in the sense of the map which included Northern Transvaal, Eastern Transvaal, Wits, Pretoria, PWV etc.

I then worked in the union for that period until I think 1997/98 I was appointed as a benefits co-ordinator, to concentrate on dealing with pensions and provident fund issues because I had been involved in negotiating them as far as 1987, when COSATU was formed I was part of the people who got involved with the negotiations. By the time I became an official like I say in 1986 they wanted me to handle strikes as a new official, so that is how I got involved in negotiating things like provident fund, I was one of the people experienced in negotiating provident funds in the union. I then, subsequent to that I was appointed as the Bargaining Secretary as well, I held dual positions, there was no one who could hold both positions at the time, with the necessary experience, this happened until 1999 when I was then elected the assistant general secretary of the union.

By that time I was obviously involved in politics, in 1993 I was the District Chairperson of what they used to call Johannesburg District of the Communist Party which was involved Alexander, Thembisa, Johannesburg West/Central, I was again involved in

Thembisa branch as the branch chairperson in the branch, I obviously changed roles there and also served as in the ANC structures in Thembisa. My role, as indicated I felt there was no contradiction to be involved in trade union activities and also play a role in politics and continue with the struggle and obviously encourage workers, mobilise them to join the Communist Party and the ANC. So those are the things I did up to .., after 1999 I was moved to Cape Town, I did a lot of travelling between Cape Town and Jo'burg because our head office is in Cape Town, my participation in local structures was affected. I remember when I went to Cape Town I was the deputy secretary of the branch of Thembisa of the party but I could not attend meetings because I travelled a lot between Cape Town and Jo'burg. At that time I started serving as a member of the Central Committee of COSATU representing FAWU, I sat in the CEC, I also led the union during that time in congresses of COSATU as part of the leadership of the union. So I played that role, I'd been in COSATU conferences representing food workers as part of their leadership in most of the conferences. So basically that's the role I played until when one (interruption – phone rang) – we dealt with all those issues, one was involved in politics and the trade union movement. I left the trade union movement because of internal politics, I was fired on alleged sexual harassment, I was framed in 2001. So I left FAWU in 2001 and left politics at the time.

Facilitator: From then until today?

Respondent: I just remained a member of the movement and of the party, participating in the branches/local structures. I do attend trade union activities, FAWU invites me as an ex official or former leader in their conferences, I attended their last elective conference. Most former leaders attend their activities, the last FAWU conference was held two years ago, or last year, leadership has changed, the new leadership did not purge me, the debate in the unions in 2001 was that people wanted me to become the general secretary because they believed our current general secretary at the time had no political vision, he didn't understand politics, they wanted somebody who had political understanding, they didn't believe he will be able to lead them as the general secretary, he then purged me,

but later they got rid of him. So the new leadership did not have a problem with me. So I would still attend their conferences. COSATU when they were opening their new building they invited me like any other former leader to give a talk. Currently I am working in the financial services sector, I still interact with workers and unions, particularly around issues of pension and provident fund, I still engage with them, advising where I can and all that.

Facilitator: this particular skill of pension and provident funds, did you undertake some courses, how did you become the master of that?

Respondent: I learnt that through negotiations, I studied Pension Law. Just to go back a bit, you will remember as indicated, when I left school I did not have Matric but I since went back to study .., most of the things I did was after 1994, I realised that I was no longer stressed about liberation and all those things, we had attained political freedom and therefore had time to study. I had been doing some studies in piece meals, I studied: IR Diploma – I continued with my studies after 1994, accelerated my studies, did my Matric just to have a record and then studied Human Resources Management at Unisa, studied Advanced Labour Law at RAAU, and also did my post-graduate in Social Security for SADC at RAAU as well, I did my thesis in Basic Income Grant. I also did Corporate and Securities Law at Unisa and Financial Management at Damelin, I also studied Principles in Labour Studies at Natal Tech, I also did a number of short courses, Ditsela courses on arbitration skills and all that. I went and did what they call the course of ILO in Torino, in 1999 I attended a course for about three weeks or so which was for the food workers international course, to understand the international dynamics, to understand how to deal with international solidarity, understand the agreements entered into in those countries, in Latin America and so on. I continued with my studies, my last studies were in Investment Analysis and Portfolio Management. I am now planning to do the Management Development Programme at Unisa, after that I will be doing other programmes like Corporate governance for public sector because I'm the independent chairperson of the Foodbev Sita appointed by the Minister of Higher Education last year part time. I am full time working for FNB as a network and

relationship manager now which has been for five years. Before that I worked for a company called Lekana Employee Benefit Solution, that's where I dealt with issues of pensions as well there as a marketing manager. I worked there for about five years as well from 2003 to 2007.

Facilitator: Just to go back you mentioned that you were born in Edenvale but then you moved to Thembisa?

Respondent: ja

Facilitator: were you forcefully moved from Edenvale or the family just decided to leave?

Respondent: It was forced removals obviously, the people of Thembisa who moved from Thembisa to Edenvale were moved by force of arms and were dumped there, there were no shops, nothing, just those straight houses, look alike houses there, no shops, no where to buy, remember there were guys from Maimela, with spaza shops, I can't remember the other guy, we called him Mshangani, they would park there in the open space with the trucks as spaza shops, that's where we were buying things and we were lighting with candles for years, and the bucket systems, no sewerage and all that, that's where I grew up

Facilitator: but you were then sent to Limpopo to study?

Respondent: I went to Limpopo to study and stayed with my aunt and became a herd boy there

Facilitator: were you a trouble maker here in the township?

Respondent: yes they were saying I'm a trouble maker and sent me to the homelands

Facilitator: but you came back again?

Respondent: I came back

Facilitator: why

Respondent: I refused to continue staying there, I said no I'm going back home

Facilitator: you then worked from one place to another before joining Dairy Belle?

Respondent: Before Dairy Belle I worked for small companies like African Gate and so on but the company I worked for longer before Dairy Belle was Colour Lab which is part of the Agfa, autographic films, we were developing films, I worked in the laboratory which was interesting for a person with standard 9, we were able to do some film ..(unclear), working in the darkroom, opening films, doing photo cutting, cutting them into batches, dispatching them etc., (recording stopped)

END

Collection Number: A3402

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

PUBLISHER:

Publisher: Historical Papers Research Archive, University of the Witwatersrand

Location: Johannesburg

©2016

LEGAL NOTICES:

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

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

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

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