

## **Thoko Magagula**

Facilitator: Ma thanks very much for your time. This is an interview with Thoko Magagula we are in Johannesburg the interview is done by Brown Maaba. Mama you can speak any language you are comfortable with. Can you just give me a sketch of your background of where you come from, where you grew up, your family background and on and how you eventually connect to the labour movement.

Respondent: I am Thokozile Magagula, I was born in Delmas but I grew up in Kwa-Thema and went to school at Kwa-Thema. I did not matriculate because my life was not okay, I stopped schooling at JC which is now called Grade 10. I then went to work in 1980 at CNA I worked for a year and moved to Temza, a telecommunications company and then there was a strike 6 months after I was employed and then we were fired because I was part of the people who joined the strike, I did not work until 1985, I got a job at Jabula Foods, that is where I developed the skills. I was elected as a shop steward because when I joined the company it was male dominated, but in 1984 they striked and they were all fired, the company then started recruiting women as well. In 1985 I was employed by this company. I started work on 3 June 1985, there was no union by then because people were still afraid, there was a liaison committee but no union, no one spoke on behalf of the workers. To me liaison to me was like more for management than for the workers. The workers were not getting an increase, we got together to talk, the employer was saying they are giving us an increase of R7 but only as a loan, and that if they do not make any profit they are going to take it back. This is when we started recruiting to say that this cannot happen like this.

Before I joined the company I was active in the community, in youth projects but not in the forefront/leadership. At that time you will remember that many things were banned (not sure what she is referring to), I was exposed this militant company in the food industry, I and J and most of my friends were working there. So I would accompany them to all their events, rallies etc. It was like I worked with them, so I got exposed to what was going on, trade union matters. So I then suggested to the other workers that we should introduce a union, I know a certain union I know which was called Sweet Food and Allied Workers Union, this is where I met bra Chris, he was the president of Sweet Food. We tried to get the forms, it was very difficult to recruit people, while we were recruiting in 1986 you will remember there was this USA??, which was aligned to IFP and it was .., our company part of its formation. This is a very sad story at the same time it is so funny. My brother belonged to USA because he was part of the liaison committee and I was recruiting for Sweet Food. When it was launched in Durban, the management was part of USA, all those who were for USA they were released to go to the launch and they were paid for by the company, at the time we were in a process of going to the ballot box to check whether our union was getting the majority or not

Facilitator: the referendum?

Respondent: It was not called referendum it was called something else I cannot remember. But when they came back they knew that they are going to get the majority, they knew we were going to lose because the majority was already at USA. They came back we went to ballot we lost because management was also part of it. We continued to recruit until the people started realising that USA is not looking after their interests. We went to the ballot after three months, we gave them a chance and

came back and we won. That is when Sweet Food was introduced in our company, I was elected shop steward. In 1986 immediately after we won there was a merger, there had been talks earlier, Sweet Food and Food and Canning the talks were advanced, then Sweet Food and Food and Canning merged and became FAWU that year, May/June that year 1986 because the conference was from 31 May until 1 June 1986, so I was part of the delegation. That is how I got involved in the trade union movement. In 1987 I was given a task to recruit for the region, provinces were called regions at the time, Highveld. I was asked to recruit women to form a Women's Forum, within 6 months I had recruited the whole of Transvaal, thereafter I was given the task to recruit nationally. I was the convenor, I recruited from 1988 until 1990. In 1990 COSATU in the 1987 Congress took a resolution that women structures must be established formally. FAWU was the first to do that and then in 1990 we established the National Women's Forum, we call it National Women's Co-ordinating structure because it was part of the education department in the union. In 1987 also at a factory floor I was appointed to be a full time shop steward then in 1991 I was elected National Second Deputy President, comrade Prince was the first president, the first deputy was comrade Peter Malebye and I was the second deputy president. I also served in the COSATU local structure in Springs where I was once elected chairperson, last year I was also the secretary of the local structure. I served as second president from 1991 to 1993 and then in 1993 I continued to be a full time shop steward at the company until the company closed in 1995 April, the company shut down.

While I was a shop steward I was also working underground with bra-Chris, I would be given tasks to organise, to be active because he was telling us that there's work to be done in the community, you cannot be a shop

steward and not be a leader in the community. I was also active in the community structures, like the Civic structure which was then called Irapo??, in the East Rand and I was also a chief in Irapo. In 1990 when the organisations were unbanned, I was also the first chairperson of the Women's League in Kwa-Thema branch. 1996 I was elected, I held that position from 1990 until 1996, in 1996 I was elected the deputy chairperson of the ANC in Kwa-Thema and also later that year I was also elected regional chairperson of the East Rand before it became Ekurhuleni, I held that position until 2003, 2003 I was elected the provincial secretary which is the position I'm still holding to date.

Facilitator: Just to go back, you said that it was important, you organised a women's wing. Why was that important per se?

Respondent: Okay, it was important because by that time, we saw a gap, most shop stewards were men in the factories and the majority of FAWU members were women, in the food industry women dominated and I was given that task, they saw me as somebody who can mobilise other women because I was active, I was militant and I was also young. Women do not want to be motivated by men, the feeling was that they thought men wanted to control them. I was given the task based on that, that women are not visible in the trade union, they were afraid of being arrested etc. , women thought that they would be arrested, the other problem was that you would be away from home, so what happens to the children – that is why I was given the task. I managed to mobilise the women, unfortunately we didn't have statistics, three years later, most of the companies affiliated had women membership, they were also willing to stand for shop steward positions and in other companies women were in the majority.

Facilitator: but being a woman in a man's world, so to speak, was it easy to manoeuvre and so on

Respondent: no it was not easy because sometimes you will find that men call meetings at night and remember there's no transport, you have to use public transport. I was also one of the people who were in the forefront when the branches were established after the merger in 1986, (FAWU), my task was to assist in building structures in the East Rand. I was the chairperson of FAWU, I was also once a secretary and a treasurer also ..., what was your question again?

Facilitator: my question was it easy to be a women in this man's world?

Respondent: It was not easy, as I had indicated, meetings were called at night, sometimes the venue was awkward for a women, and also your contribution, to some you would be seen as a threat because you are this woman who does not keep quiet, you are this woman who contributes to the discussions and it was not seen as right. And also when we go to the bargaining council, in most cases women issues were used to bargain and you would want to defend that. I remember when we ..., because we fell under Premier Foods, so we had what was called sector/bargaining forum, in the sector you would find that men would like to bargain with maternity benefits and I had to fight. We were the second company that won the 6 months maternity leave after SACAWU, and also having crèches within companies, we were about to win it but unfortunately the company closed down. We wanted child facilities within the company.

Facilitator: did the men's attitude change over time or did they remain chauvinistic as far as you remember?

Respondent: they changed over time, they tend to recognise women and realised that if women really wanted something they will go after it whatever the circumstances. There were those few that remained with the attitude who would say "oh this woman" but most of them were okay ..., for instance like bra-Chris, he would encourage us and say stand up to these men do not allow them to stand on your heads. He gave us a lot of support.

Facilitator: your involvement in the struggle, did that not impact negatively in your domestic affairs, you were an active, sometimes the fear could be you may lose the job and your kids will suffer, you come back late at home, how did you balance family and work life?

Respondent: Fortunately I am not married and was not married I stayed at home. At home as you know some parents would not allow you to dominate the boys, I would say to them "we are the same, to me this is a game he is playing for Pirates and I'm playing for Chiefs" at the end of the day I lost, my parents would not accept me as I am because my brother would tell them what I was doing at work. My parents chased me away and I went to rent a place of my own. I would go to bra-Chris's home, his parents supported me and I treated them as my parents, they would guide me when I needed it. But it was not easy.

Facilitator: what about other women, I know that you were not there per se, you would hear some stories, how did they cope, the married ones etc? How did they manoeuvre?

Respondent: some women were afraid to participate because they wanted to secure their marriages, others would find a way to make their husbands to understand, other men would accompany their partners to meetings so that they can have a better understanding, they realised that the women were focussing on their rights and the rights of the workers that's it.

Facilitator: at work you were the first person to bring the union, basically to the firm? Your relationship the employer, was there tension or was it just fine?

Respondent: when we started some of the managers decided to resign, those that did not want changes decided to resign and of course others were adamant that we will not succeed they stayed on. We fought until we got things right. I remember comrade Zandi Nkosi in 1988 she was fired for her involvement in the labour movement. What I'm saying is the workers used to victimise us, I remember one time we had a strike in our company, I was told that I am now fired, it was myself and one of the shop steward who passed on last year – the following day we came back, the strike was not yet over, we were supposed to invite an organiser to be part of our meeting, to intervene, when he came we went to the meeting, then the director told us that he cannot stand for workers who do not listen to management, who are arrogant, he then told us that he fired us yesterday and we are here without permission, he was telling the organiser that he would rather resign because he can't fire us, those things happen. I then told him that obviously you're not making any productive impact, we are the ones who are working here, who are bringing profits to the company whether you resign or not, I also told him

that when it comes to retrenchments you are always the first to come out because you were the last to be employed, we were first. So those were some of the challenges. He resigned. That is why at the end of the day the company closed down because they felt that they can't control us.

Facilitator: was it moved elsewhere or was it just completely shut down?

Respondent: it was completely shut down.

Facilitator: I also want to find out the role of shop stewards, when you look back compared to now, what were the strengths and what were the weaknesses, where have you lost it now at the moment?

Respondent: by then I think at the time because there was militancy involved, the exploitation within companies, this created a lot of militancy, we were not afraid, we would still fight even if we were told they are going to shoot at us we would still fight for the workers, we never sold out. The difference between then and now is that it is now easier to join the union, most people are joining just for the benefits etc. With us it was the worker rights, the wages and at the same time the struggle of the country, solidarity etc. If the company next door fires its workers we would support them irrespective of the reasons we would understand later, we would ask our employer to talk to the other employer, other people are fired now for no reason and there is no support

Facilitator: you are on your own?

Respondent: yes



Facilitator: the relationship USA and other unions that were ANC linked, including Sweet and Food, how was it like, when your brother was organising for USA, you probably have an experience of direct tensions?

Respondent: In our company we fought physically, in fact the employer decided to fire USA members – we had no option but to bring evidence to the employer, we gave them facts not allegations. So they were all fired, everybody respected us and joined FAWU and realised this is the way to go, other employees came to us and apologised and told us that they did not understand. There were a lot of tensions that is why my parents chased me away from home.

Facilitator: and the general changes faced by the unions faced by unions at that time when you look back?

Respondent: the recognition agreement we signed, there was no agreement, we signed it and employers were no longer imposing wages on us, they listened to the workers demands, the workers were now treated with respect, the employer was no longer firing workers as they did in the past. In the food industry you can imagine there was a lot of theft, it was very common, even if a person was found right handed it was difficult for them to fire him/her because we would go and defend them, in some cases the workers would steal a whole truck full of food we would defend them because we didn't want people to go hungry. We would reason this way, a man lives in a family of 10 he is the only one working, so we have to think for the other nine instead of the one

Facilitator: any draw backs at that time or failures when you look back?

Respondent: our strength, the winables was that at least we got what we wanted, our demands were met and achieved even though we did not achieve all, out of 100% we would achieve at least 20% (interruption) people would do wrong things therefore other companies would withdraw from our agreements, this was a major set back, some companies closed down.

Facilitator: you also mentioned earlier that it was difficult to recruit in the beginning?

Respondent: yes

Facilitator: what was wrong with the workers mentality, where was the difficulty?

Respondent: people were afraid to be arrested, others did not want to be killed, obviously trade unions were used to mobilise .., to fight for the South African struggle – if you join the union it was perceived as being a political activist, so people did not want to get involved with unions or politics

Facilitator: what made them to mellow then?

Respondent: over time people realised that although trade unions have their set backs they have achieved a lot. When we won the wage agreements and other things they wanted they realised the benefits of belonging to the union, this was to their benefit they all wanted money

Facilitator: you also mentioned that before unions there was a liaison committee at Jabula Food which was more like a mouthpiece of the workers. How was it elected, was it by the workers or by the employer?

Respondent: I understand, because I was not there, my understanding was that they were appointed by the workers.

Facilitator: is there anything that you think is important that we did not talk about which I should have maybe asked about?

Respondent: If remember something I will call you. So far, FAWU was one of the trade unions that built COSATU and COSATU knows that without FAWU COSATU would not exist. Now FAWU is not there, it's like its dead, there is no militancy like they had in the past.

Facilitator: where did the strength of FAWU lie in the sense that COSATU relied on it, where was its strength then? You said that it was the backbone of COSATU?

Respondent: the strength of FAWU was that our president was involved in the struggle of the country and he would use every platform to mobilise the people – he had a way of making people understand the history of the country, how white people took away our country and that we can get it back. He educated a lot of people and encouraged people to fight to win the country back.

Facilitator: so the power was it in numbers per se,,, ?

Respondent: yes

Facilitator: but certain individuals?

Respondent: yes.

Facilitator: any closing word maybe?

Respondent: what I would like to say is I personally was groomed by baba Chris Dlamini, I learnt a lot from him, to date in order for me to survive some of the things, as you know in politics there will be infighting etc., but I was taught not to get involved in factions without knowing the facts, find out and act on what you know, stick to the facts, the constitution of the organisation and its principles then you will succeed. That is how I succeeded, I am still surviving even today .., you can bring any storm I will remain, you can take your position but you cannot take me away from being married to this organisation.

Facilitator: when you look back, was it worth it to be involved in worker struggle?

Respondent: yes, it was worth it, I remember how we used to .., in Kwa-Thema we once had what was called *azikhwelwa* because we were fighting for high rise in the bus fares, Putco, the mobilisation helped us realise that the bus operators cannot just wake up in the morning and raise fares, why are the workers not getting an increase, other people are unemployed and are having to rely on those that are employed, how are they going to travel when they need to travel. Yes it was worth it.

Facilitator: Sesi Thoko thanks for your time, I will call you should I need more info.

Respondent: alright, thanks

END

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