

Matlakala Lebetsa

Facilitator: Okay this is an interview with Matlakala Lebetsa we are in Bloemfontein the date is 30 June 2011, interview is done by Brown Maaba. Thanks very much for your time. Please give me a background of where you were born, how you were raised and how you ended up at Telkom, and then finally the world of unions?

Respondent: As I said I am Matlakala Malahle Lebetsa, born and bred in Bloemfontein, married in 1993, have two kids, a boy and a girl and I started working at Telkom in 1997 but previously I had worked for Sambou Bank. I came to Telkom in 1997 as a service representative in the sales department. Due to the movement we moved from one section to another and presently I am in the call centre since 2008, due to the movement I could not move to Pretoria when we had to follow our jobs. I studied management leadership at the University of Free State. How I ended in the unions, the way you engage, you know when you have studied you have the broader picture of what is happening in the companies and you don't just fight only in the unions but you have to think of the company needs as well, you have to balance them so that people are not victimised or exploited. So every time ..., in the section I am working I always exercise the policies as well and to check the union side just for people to .., you know when it comes to work its so frustrating when you come to work being victimised/frustrated, it means there won't be any productivity anyway. So we are here, in the organised labour to protect the members. And why I am elected is because they could see a potential in me that I always engaged with management. If there are things that are going wrong in the section, immediately I call a meeting

with management. Its important for me that we always resolve problems before they become worse. Presently I am the provincial treasurer.

Facilitator: Just to go back to your background, do you come from a well to do family or do you come from a union family?

Respondent: I come from a religious family, 7th Day Adventist church.

Facilitator: so the whole issue of the union ..?

Respondent: the whole of the union I got it in Telkom

Facilitator: but if you studied management leadership but why that particular kind of line?

Respondent: I studied that before I joined the unions, I was a union member but became interested in the unions .., I studied management leadership, for me, sometimes you cannot just be in one position, when you get another position at least you are groomed, you understand what is the business all about that is why I studied that. That is why I'm saying when we engage with management I always even advise them that its giving me a broader picture that I understand the requirements of the business, I understand why the union should be part of the agreement in the company as well.

Facilitator: Other than Communication Workers Union, are there other unions?

Respondent: there are other unions, solidarity and SACCO, but Communication Workers Union is the majority.

Facilitator: what is the majority?

Respondent: We blacks are more than, its joined more by blacks, but there are whites who have joined us, who are still joining us and so we are in the majority.

Facilitator: the kind of challenges that are faced by the workers in this industry, how would you describe them, or Telkom maybe?

Respondent: You can say Telkom not only Telkom anyway in the industry. Previously, during the apartheid era, whites were benefiting more and their salaries were more than blacks. Now what we are actually even fighting for now is the salary disparities because whites are still earning more than we do

Facilitator: really?

Respondent: ja they are still earning more than we do because their salaries at that time were higher than us, even now that's why we are fighting for salary disparities. They were more privileged because they were getting positions and if you can look at the structure, the structure in Telkom, top structure yes mostly it will be blacks, but in the middle there are whites, operational are blacks, so we still feel oppressed because why can't they change that. Top structure are blacks but for me they are looking at their own interests. Why can't they help us because we all fought for the struggle. So they are there because of the BEE, Affirmative

Action, but for me there isn't much change that took place. We still need a change. You will find that most people in the operational level have degrees, now people in the middle are placed there because they have the experience because they benefited from the apartheid era, whites. They are managers, but with no qualifications. So how are they going to assist the company to reach its objectives, they are placed there because they have experience. We need people with innovative ideas, that's what we need. So why don't they consider that. If they can consider that .., you know old people have their own problems and all that, but young people, fresh blood they are innovative because they are able to think from all angles. So if the company can consider that as well.

Facilitator: but you mentioned that the top structure is black and middle management is white?

Respondent: yes, most, the middle ones .., the top structure, executive are blacks, the managers, senior managers most of them are whites, operational are blacks. That's why you will find that .., in organised labour, the unions, we blacks are more than whites, whites are there and when they are in management they cannot belong to the union. On the other levels its blacks, that's why we are in the majority

Facilitator: but has management done something about that, top management?

Respondent: No we've been talking about that but you know they said they are looking into that. For us its not working, its very slow.

Facilitator: but what has the union done to ensure that ..?

Respondent: we are still engaging on that. Every time when we sit for negotiations we still have the outstanding issues of those salary disparities. They can be .., the whites can be on the same level with a black person but they still earn more than us. You know they used to start work at an early age, 18/19 or so, at that time we didn't work. So when we came here with the qualifications those were not considered. They are considered because of the experience and for me that is not taking the company anywhere.

Facilitator: ja because there's no vision?

Respondent: there's no vision.

Facilitator: but how has that affected the operation of the company in general?

Respondent: for me its demoralising, it demoralises most of the people because you cannot be supervised or managed by someone who's incompetent and you come with your innovative ideas this side. You are the one advising this person and this person is earning more than you, and you are the one doing the job. You know seeing that this section is not right, you volunteer to assist this one, this should not be like this it should be like this – this person is getting more salary.

Facilitator: but other pressing issues within the workplace that need the attention of the unions, other than this one?

Respondent: You know when we have cases you will find that, as I said, most of management are white people, they are the ones who chair the cases, so what we are facing is they dismiss black people in the cases. That is another challenge as well. Our employee relations manager is a white person. You know you will find that they are consulting with them, he is giving them the advise, he is white as well "dismiss the person". That is the challenge that we are facing now.

Facilitator: has the union done something about that?

Respondent: we met with the executive, in central region, this happens a lot in the central region. The salary disparities all the regions are facing, in all the provinces. The problem we are facing here is that black people are dismissed most of the time

Facilitator: in this region, Bloemfontein?

Respondent: in this region.

Facilitator: but is it the case with other regions?

Respondent: In other regions it is not happening in that way, but here as I said, here there was a lot of boers, but this is what we've been tackling for a very long time.

Facilitator: in terms of salary negotiations, does management pay attention to those things?

Respondent: no they don't it's a hell of a fight, how can management offer 4.5% salary increase, below the inflation. They were supposed to .., if according to me, if they could have rectified the salary disparities first and we are almost on the par, and they implement the 4.5%, we were all going to benefit, so those who were advantaged before won't be advantaged, we will be advantaged because our salaries would be on par with theirs. That is not happening. They said they were looking into it but it is still not fixed. It's a battle that we are fighting and we don't seem to win, but our black people are there, they know the whole story. They are there because of the struggle.

Facilitator: so this is not tripping down, from top management?

Respondent: ja

Facilitator: and what about the position of women in general in terms of positions of power?

Respondent: You know the CEO, Pinkie Mogudi, before she was actually involved in women empowerment, I thought she was going to drive this thing as quickly as possible because she has the power to do so. But it doesn't seem to be as fast as we expected. Women are still .., men are still holding senior positions, so we don't know – for me, they don't seem to care about women and the potential of women because you cannot sit here, with a degree still operational. If it is still operational they have to find something for you, they have to give you a position that is relevant to you, so that you are fully utilised in order to reach the company's objectives.

Facilitator: In general, in terms of ..(unclear) the issue of women is it a central issue?

Respondent: No its nationally, we are also, I talked about that when we had the national executive committee as well, that we are facing this woman thing as well, in the union, the organisation itself. I talked about this issue that we have to bring women on board, it can't only be us. It seems as if the union is only for men, that can't be. They agreed that we need to restructure.

Facilitator: are they going to restructure there?

Respondent: they are going to restructure and we going to empower a lot of women, we going to workshop them so that they should know what is the union all about, what is the struggle all about and all the stuff

Facilitator: but are women keen to take up these positions?

Respondent: some are keen to participate, but you know men are always fighting for the positions?

Facilitator: against women or they just fighting amongst themselves?

Respondent: ja, among themselves. So women will sit back and ask themselves why are the men fighting for these positions you know. They do not want women to be on board immediately, but they said they will look into it. I said you shouldn't look into it there are people who are willing to be part of the union, part of organised labour, to be in the structures. But because of them, they are just fighting for the position for

themselves. It's just like in government, it's the same, that is why you will find that there's a lot of sexual harassment, a lot of abuse in government structures. You will find that men are holding positions and when women must be employed there they first want to have sex with them. So its not only in the .., this thing comes from the government itself. So in the companies it continues

Facilitator: but do you think that will be resolved in a short space of time or is it going to take years?

Respondent: I think its taking years. If women who are in top management can see to it that women are in power that can change things. Women in power I don't see them attending to this matter fast enough.

Facilitator: the general working conditions in this industry, how would you describe it?

Respondent: the conditions are okay, not that bad, but the problem is only those differences of money and all that. The duties, we are doing the same duties. There were others that used to take advantage that they are superiors, that they can do as they wish, I told them that this is not your business, this is not your company you not going to do whatever pleases, you all going to work here, we are here to work. That's why I'm saying its better to confront them immediately. There are still a lot of cases pending, but if you check mostly those cases are against blacks.

Facilitator: any form of exploitation, complaints around that?

Respondent: yes we lodged a grievance against the ER? Manager because we found that he is the one .., if a manager was not intending to lodge a case against a black person, person for misusing a car or whatever, you will find that he ER Manager is the one who would instigate for the person to be charged. So that's what I'm saying .., there is still exploitation.

Facilitator: issues around race relations?

Respondent: You know racism, because there are policies in place, in the past there was racism. But now, they are getting used to us, that they cannot live alone or behave as if they own the company. There are some racial discriminations. Here in the central region, the Telkom Direct Shop, the manager is very racist. She is just giving positions to whites and coloureds, she does not employ blacks. She doesn't want to release people when they want to go for interviews, its another fight, there's always fights

Facilitator: which interviews?

Respondent: ja other job interviews in Telkom or in another region. We took it up when we had our Regional Forum. So managers were invited, complaints were put on the table and we talked about it. Now she was called to order.

Facilitator: so other burning issues that have to be addressed by unions other than what you have mentioned, what do they include?

Respondent: There are still a lot of things that I have mentioned and I'm just thinking of the rest. If I recall something I will send you an email, there are a lot of issues that I have to look into

Facilitator: but do you think that workers are happy with the whole CWU??, ..(unclear) their cases or the issues?

Respondent: You know they are happy but the problem is the outcome, the outcome because of the ER Manager who is involved in giving the chairpersons an instruction to dismiss. The ER Manager is giving instructions of dismissal to the chairpersons.

Facilitator: so in the end you more or less lose most of the cases?

Respondent: ja we are losing most of the cases in that case, but when we appeal you will find that others are coming back, depending on the weight of the case.

Facilitator: but in your view, are these cases serious or they are made to be serious, or they are less serious?

Respondent: they are made to be serious. Others as I'm saying, you can just have a meeting, one on one with your manager, but if the ER Manager find that there is a loophole, misuse of company car and all that, he will say its misconduct or whatever. In most cases you would have spoken to your supervisor that because you are going out you have to via your place to take a bag and all that. He would insist no it wasn't your route. So you were not supposed to go there, you had spoken to your supervisor that you will via your home, they make it a serious case.

This is happening mostly to the technicians. The last time we had a case here, this guy was dismissed, he was still here in Bloemfontein, he went to Gauteng, he worked in Gauteng, he worked there for a year and he came back again. When he came back they expected him to work immediately, he was supposed to be trained first because he had worked in a different environment, to get training on the new job. So they took it as if he didn't come to work, he lost the job. He submitted a grievance, he was right that he had no work station, he was not trained, but he was charged and fired for that. The senior manager is a black person, he charged him and the manager is white, the senior manager is a black person. Now I couldn't understand how can a black person do that to a black person, he could see what the intentions were. At the end he was fired for insubordination. They knew that they didn't give him equipment and a work station to do the work. So its like we blacks as well, we are in positions but we are still uncertain about ourselves. We are holding positions there, but its like we are still controlled by white people. So we still need to do introspection on ourselves.

Facilitator: so in general you guys are affiliated under COSATU?

Respondent: yes

Facilitator: what should be the future of unions in this country, what is the future of this unions concerning all those issues that you have mentioned?

Respondent: COSATU knows about this, they get reports of what is happening in organisations. We have to resolve the matters, we want to see black people in positions because they are skilled, they are learned, they are educated, and they have to revise the qualifications. They don't

want to see black people suffering, they have to get the jobs according to their level of understanding, their qualifications, those that are not educated they have to be where they are supposed to be.

Facilitator: What are some of the challenges faced by CWU at a national level?

Respondent: At a national level, I don't want to dwell much into national level issues because they are the ones handling matters at national level. So I think perhaps if we can meet with people at national. Yes we are in meetings sometimes with them as provincial representatives, but their meetings with the company I don't attend the meetings. Jowa is the one who is attending the company meetings as a full time shop steward as a provincial secretary. But the woman empowerment in the company should be addressed, salary disparities should be addressed, qualifications should be taken into consideration. We need a flat structure not a hierarchical structure, things will improve if we have a flat structure. Like I said we have operations here, we have whites but they just have blacks, for me its hierarchical structure, if we can have a flat structure just to go around to see, to work on that. Many people will have positions, will be multi skilled etc.

Facilitator: but in terms of skills acquisition, are there whites which are willing to impart skills to the lower management people?

Respondent: yes those are the ones

Facilitator: but do they impart the skills or are they not supposed to ..?

Respondent: there are developments but they are very slow. Those whites who are sitting there, presently they are doing things according to the policy but they are more skilled than us because they've been with the company for longer, they have the experience as well. They do not impart the skills, they keep it for themselves. If there can be a development that this person has got a list of this on his development, let other people who do not have the skill to be skilled also. But now, they will be talking about cost savings now, these people have acquired the skills. What about us?

Facilitator: would you say that this sector is different from the other union sectors, CWU, if yes in what sense? Or are there similarities?

Respondent: yes there is because I always attend meetings in COSATU with other union sectors, there isn't much difference, the difference is how we engage with management, but there isn't much of a difference.

Facilitator: you think the problems are more or less the same?

Respondent: the problems are more or less the same

Facilitator: what is the way forward in all the situation?

Respondent: we have our plan and as I said we did .., we presented it to management. As I am saying things do not happen as fast as we expected.

Facilitator: Is there anything else that you think is important?

Respondent: If I remember something I will just email you, please give me your email address.

Facilitator: any closing word maybe?

Respondent: What I can say, yes we are still in the struggle, we are striving for a better life and as I'm saying women should be empowered.

Facilitator: Thank you very much for your time

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Collection Number: A3402

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

PUBLISHER:

Publisher: Historical Papers Research Archive, University of the Witwatersrand

Location: Johannesburg

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