

# *A good track record*

**I** was born in Nylstroom in 1964. My father was a switchboard operator at the Post Office. In 1968 he got a job at Iscor in Pretoria so we moved there. In 1970 I started school in Erasmia.

## **My destiny**

In primary school I liked maths and science and wanted to become a scientist. However, I left school in standard eight to become an artisan. I think it was my destiny to work with my hands and be creative. I attended Pretoria West Technical College. I enjoyed it as the unnecessary subjects were something of the past. Our education department should look at allowing children to specialise at a younger age.

In 1983 I started my apprenticeship. I passed my trade test with distinction and in 1986 qualified as a diesel electrical fitter. My first job was at Koedoespoort diesel depot. I did maintenance jobs on the locomotives. At the end of January 1987 I received my first pay cheque. I was quite shocked as it was only R168 because I thought artisans were well remunerated. I had to pay installments on my motorbike, pay rent to my parents and had a clothing account. So there was very little money to spend.

## **Introduction to the union**

As an apprentice we had to sign a service contract with the old training board. For a

*Etienne Vlok and William Matlala interview Willem Singleton – United Transport and Allied Trade Union (UTATU) Executive Officer – Northern Transvaal.*

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youngster who had just left school it was important to know what you were signing. I went to the shopsteward who refused to help me unless I joined his union. So I joined the Technical Workers Union (TWU) in 1983 and have been a member ever since.

When I was a young artisan, I had a very short temper. I had an old black man, Samuel, working with me. He is on pension today. He was like a brother to me and whatever I asked he would do. I was working on a locomotive one day and was struggling with a new torque. Its air pressure was not sufficient to loosen bolts on a cylinder, so I said to Samuel "Please stand aside, I am going to break this thing". I threw it on the platform and it broke. I had to fill in a broken tool report and the cost of the repairs was deducted from my pay.

About two weeks later the shopsteward singled me out during a meeting for damaging the tools. He gave me a decent



scolding. I lost my temper and told him to shut up. When he reminded me that I could not speak to him like that as he was a shopsteward, I threw a plastic chair at him and walked out of the meeting.

Only in 1994 when I was elected shopsteward I realised it is not an easy task. Member expectations are high and the shopsteward is blamed for things that go wrong.

## Being an executive officer

I was a shopsteward for six months when I was elected regional secretary for Northern Transvaal. Then, during our Cape Town conference I was elected executive officer for Northern Transvaal.

In the old TWU we had a president and a vice-president. Under the vice-president are eight executive officers representing the regions. As executive officer I represent our members on national forums. Whenever I get the time I return to my constituency in the Pretoria area to give feedback on what is going on in the labour front and with the restructuring of Spoornet. Whenever I can interact with members, I do so.

It is very important to join a union. I always use this example: take a single match. It is easy to break it. However, try to break 20 matches in a bundle. It is not that easy. Unions look after the interests of employees because most of them do not know their rights. Who would speak on your behalf if you are not a member of a union?

## The birth of UTATU

Transnet is busy with restructuring. When I started at Transnet we were 210 000 employees. Today we are only 87 000. Spoornet shrunk from 54 000 in 1990 to 37 400. Both the South African Footplate Staff Association (SAFSA) and TWU are recognised in Transnet. With the

restructuring process we lost members so it was important for us to widen our focus and recruit more members. It was also important to join forces as it strengthens us in the bargaining process. We are under pressure with the decline of our membership and the reduction of new jobs.

On 20 November 2000 TWU and SAFSA's application to merge was approved and we became UTATU. Both executive committees have accepted that after the inaugural congress some of us might not be here. But the members and their interests are much more important than the leadership.

## Wage negotiations

An important item on our agenda is the yearly wage negotiation. Each union comes to the table with its requests and demands, trying to get the best possible deal for its members. These negotiations are very complex taking into account the different grades of employees we represent. We cannot all be winners but as far as possible we try to arrive at a win-win situation that is good for the company and its employees.

## Restructuring at Spoornet

Restructuring is the single most important issue facing UTATU. As a union, your first responsibility is towards your members. The employers' first responsibility is to comply with what the shareholders want. With Transnet being a parastatal, there is enormous pressure from government to ensure it becomes financially viable.

During our deliberations with Spoornet management we had such different views on how to get the company viable that the company decided to use private consultants. The first group was Mercer - American consultants who were involved in restructuring across Europe and the



United States. Their report proposed that the company get rid of 27 000 employees. That came as a shock to all the unions. It was strange that government is trying to address unemployment yet Spoornet was talking about the retrenchment of 27 000 employees. At the end of the day labour rejected Mercer's proposal.

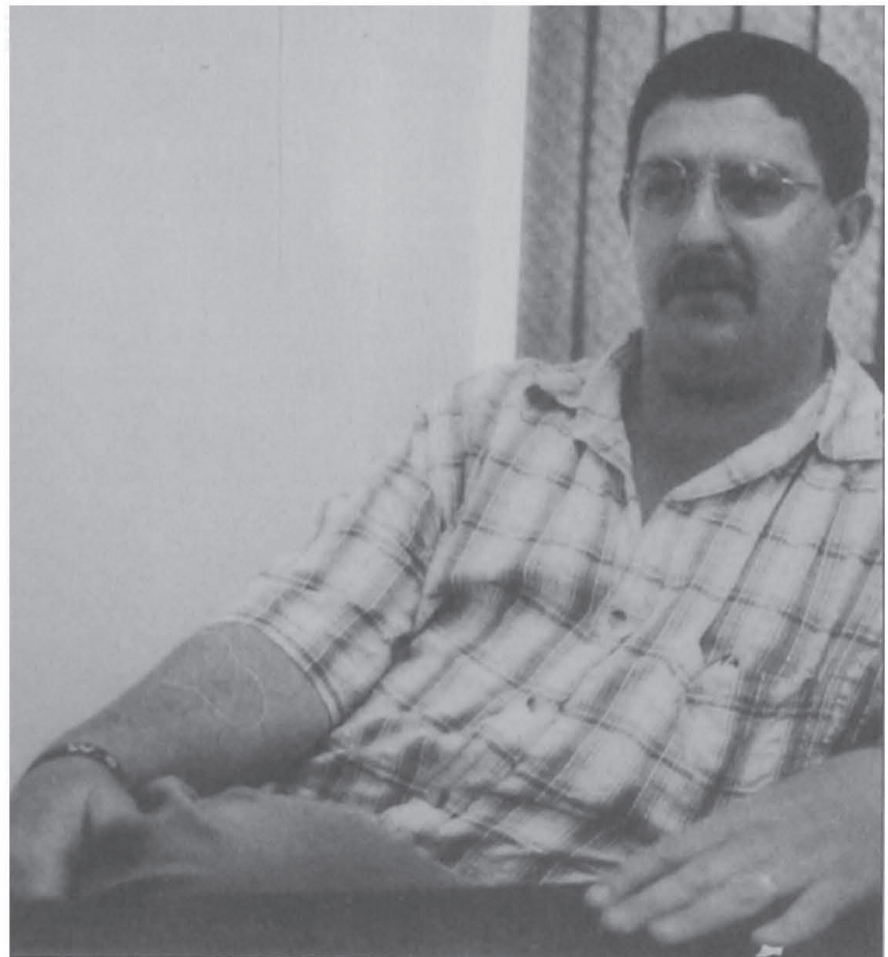
We decided to get a second opinion from Halcro - British consultants who were involved in the restructuring of the railways there. In their report Halcro mentioned a figure of 18 000 retrenchments.

Of course the huge difference in the amounts was a big concern to us. Even Spoornet does not agree totally with the Halcro findings. They have drawn up their own plan which they will submit to government soon.

Labour was pro-active in this process. We drew up a document about the restructuring of Spoornet. In it we show where Spoornet could be in three years' time. Last year during a two-day breakaway we took management through it. An important issue in the Halcro report was the closing down of 11 000 kms of branch and non-productive lines because the company gets very low return on investment on those lines. Labour could not support these closures as some communities are totally dependant on those lines and will surely die then.

## At home

I have been married for 12 years and have a boy who will turn 11 in March. My wife works at a computer college. She supports



me in my work and sometimes helps with filing, typing and arranging seminars and meetings.

I like to spend my free time on electronics, building electronic ignitions, dimmers for lights and alarms but in the past seven years I have not had much time for my hobby. In my free time I enjoy reading, especially arbitration awards and books.

I don't think any committed unionist will ever have the luxury of totally relaxing and getting away from work. Over weekends it is a bit more quiet although some members work shifts and problems arise. Sometimes I am also requested to intervene and assist with domestic problems. I have learnt to understand people and empathise with their problems. If I should ever be given the opportunity to do what I have been doing these last few years, I wouldn't hesitate to do it again.' ★