

A new terrain of struggle

Ruth Mhlongo belongs to a generation of activists in the 1980s and early 1990s whose role had a profound impact on the struggle for democracy in South Africa.

But, for Mhlongo, activism was not just about some abstract notion of democracy. Her commitment was driven by a desire to change the lives of those around her for the better. This commitment and activism took up most of her time and energy as a student, a worker and a resident of Alexandra in Johannesburg. It saw her participate in the activities of the Congress of South African Students (COSAS), street committees, the Alexandra Civic Organisation, NUMSA, the SACP and the ANC. Today she represents the people of Ward 35 in Alexandra on the Eastern Metropolitan Local Council.

Confronting the bosses

After she left school, Mhlongo found work at Hydrex and Konplast in Marlboro in 1986 as a machine operator. Three months after getting the job she started organising workers into the Metal and Allied Workers' Union (MAWU). 'There was lots of exploitation at work,' she explains. 'As a person who was involved in street committees here in the township and at school where I was a member of COSAS, I felt that, "now this is the time". But the problem I had was that the workers were scared of white people. They called them

Sakhela Bublangu's second article in our series on upward mobility among unionists is based on an interview with Ruth Mhlongo, ex-NUMSA shopsteward now local municipal councillor in Johannesburg.

bars and madam.' She persevered and eventually most workers joined the union. She was elected chairperson of the shopstewards committee, a position she held until she stepped down in 1995. She was later elected chairperson of the regional women's committee.

Building a strong union

As a shopsteward, Mhlongo built the workers into a strong force. One of the first things she did was ask the union to run education programmes for its members. 'After joining the union, the workers became stronger,' she says. The democratic tradition rapidly took root as members started showing interest in what leadership was doing and how decisions were being taken. 'Workers always came to general meetings. When a long time passed without a general meeting they would ask

me when the next meeting was going to be held. They demanded report-backs. When the manager called me into his office, they would ask me what he had said. So every little thing that happened when I was in the office had to be explained. For example, I would have to report that the boss was complaining that the cleaners do not clean the toilets properly, or that the workers go to the toilet too often. I accepted this as a good practice.'

But there were some areas of weakness in the union at the plant. One of these was the fact that the other two shopstewards needed to be pushed all the time, and when Mhlongo took maternity leave in 1991 she came back to find that union strength had declined. The problem arose after the manager unilaterally extended her leave from six to nine months. 'He saw that the strength of the union had declined in my absence because the other shopstewards were not very active. The boss was happy that I was not there and there were no monthly meetings and no problems. He stopped paying for time-off for shopstewards going to national congresses. There was a COSATU national congress in 1991. I was forced to leave my three-month-old baby and go to the national congress because none of the other shopstewards from my factory wanted to go because the boss refused to pay.'

Freedom

When she came back, the union became strong again until 1994 when Mhlongo became active in the community. But Mhlongo believes that this decline occurred in all the unions. 'The democratic government brought people freedom, I can say that, because now even ordinary workers will tell you that "I am not scared of a white person now". So the way I see it

is that when democracy arrived, many people thought they had been liberated all over, everywhere. Today people are not interested in continuing the struggle, even at work. Many strong leaders went to Parliament, others went to the [provincial] legislature and we went to local government. The workers thought that these leaders would also push the demands of the workers.'

A tough choice

In 1995 Mhlongo was nominated by local organisations in Alexandra to stand as an ANC councillor in Ward 35. She says the decision to leave the shopsteward position was a hard one to take. 'I thought about the effect of me stepping down as a shopsteward, but I thought that the community also needs me to assist them. I still had the confidence that the other shopstewards would carry on with the work, and if they need assistance, then I will assist them on some issues. But it was a sad thing for me to pull out of the trade union because I was learning a lot of things.' But one also gets the impression that at that time she was beginning to feel a need to move on. She maintains that there is limited scope for mobility in the union. On the other hand, local government has widened her scope and opportunities. 'To stay in the union, yes, we achieved some things, but you'll end up being a member of the trade union, as a shopsteward, a chairperson or a secretary. You will end up there instead of moving on. Take me now in local government, I know a lot of things, even though I do not know everything. If our term comes to an end, I can apply for another job within the government rather than remaining in the union because there I would remain a secretary at local level or in the region.'

The people of Ward 35 gave Mhlongo a resounding victory over her contestants.



'I learned a lot of things in the union.'

The DP candidate got 12 votes, the IFP four and the NNP 36. She says she got too many votes and was so excited that she forgot the total number.

New terrain

Mhlongo still works as a machine operator at Hydrex and Konplast. But most of her spare time is taken up by attending council meetings and attending to the needs of her constituents. She also serves on the council's economic development committee. She says that the council is 'different from the union local' because of the delicate balancing act that has to be achieved in winning the support of the different political parties. In addition, the need to maintain unity within the majority party can act to discourage dissent on issues such as privatisation. 'So, some of the things, even though you don't like them, at the end of the day you have to accept. Yes, compared to the union, we have to swallow more unpalatable things here.'

The problems that the people of Alexandra face are enormous. But Mhlongo is happy that as a council they have started to deliver on certain things such as repairing leaking roofs of council houses, replacing masonite toilets with ones made of metal sheets and putting down speed humps to calm down traffic in one dangerous road in her ward.

Many people visit her family home every day to discuss their problems with her. She also gets calls all the time to assist people in her ward, to call the fire department or to deal with illegal electricity connections by some of the illegal immigrants in the informal settlement.

Management at Hydrex and Konplast treats Mhlongo with 'absolute respect' and are very flexible regarding her attendance of council meetings. 'I just inform him that "tomorrow I will be going to a meeting". Sometimes you find that we go to the council together for Business Forum



Mhlongo believes she should live with the people she represents.

meetings. We both get into a car and drive to a meeting. Of course we differ on certain issues, because sometimes I have to be firm on council matters. Then on our way back we chat and he will say, "Oh Ruth, but you were difficult on this one".

What is wrong with unions?

Mhlongo is critical of the way unions operate today. She says the slogan, 'an injury to one is an injury to all', has now become an empty slogan. 'That solidarity is now absent. Everybody is for himself. It's not like before. Morale is now low and companies are retrenching people. Retrenchment is killing the fighting spirit of the workers.'

She also feels that her union is neglecting the workers in her factory. No shopsteward elections have been held since 1995 and no union official has visited the workers since then. 'We are in NUMSA only because we are paying subs to the union. I don't know where some of

the new officials come from. They just sit in the offices and conduct their work through the phone. The servicing of workers is not happening today because if you do not report a problem or phone the official, the official will not come.'

She is also unhappy about progress made in promoting women leadership. 'The problem that I'm having within the trade union is that you don't find female comrades who are organisers. Before comrade Dorothy [Mogalo] died or before I went into local government, there were only two female organisers in NUMSA. So I can say that there is nepotism within the union which acts against women.'

Living in the township

She lives in a humble home in 16th Avenue, which she shares with her mother and other family members. She has no intention of moving out of the township as many other activists have done. She says it is very important that she should live

with the people she represents as issues and problems come up all the time. After all, it is this accessibility that made her effective as a union leader on the shopfloor. 'Even at midnight they wake me up when the shacks catch fire. Then I need to arrange with the fire brigade and get fire extinguishers. I must go with them so that I can show them the area. And I need to provide those people with blankets.'

She criticises those activists who have moved out. 'The fact that an activist moves out of the township confirms what people have been saying, that we are on a gravy train. Comrades should stay in the township and experience the problems that our people face, because when the person lives outside the township, that person lives another life. When the person moves out of the township, he or she changes. Even the accent of that person changes. When you meet him or her, the person will, say "hi" - they no longer say "helta!" when they greet you.'

Learning from others

Ruth Mhlongo always makes a point of acknowledging people who encouraged, supported and guided her. Her mother, Anne Mhlongo, is a veteran of the ANC Women's League and was part of the 1956 women's march in Pretoria. She was a member of NEHAWU. Mhlongo was so inspired by her mother's resilience: 'If my mum did that, why shouldn't I?'

Others who shaped Mhlongo's political activism include, Moss Mayekiso, Baba K, Adrienne Bird, Justice Ngidi, Obed Bapela, Dorothy Mogalo, Sizakele Nkosi and many others. One of Mhlongo's most remarkable attributes is her humility and willingness to learn from others. In part, this accounts for her effective leadership, both as a shopsteward and a local government councillor as it ensures that her judgements are always informed by what

others around her think. A lot of it has to do with her loyalty to the tradition of leadership accountability in which she was schooled during her time as a shopsteward.

The future

Mhlongo is committed to serving the people of Alexandra. If she is re-elected next year she will continue to serve her constituents, but if she is not re-elected she will consider other options. She is currently doing a public relations course with UNISA and if she fails to get back into the council she may apply for a job in government. She will also consider working for the unions - but for her the problem is that women can only become administrators with very little scope for moving into other jobs in the unions.

Although Mhlongo has spent many years struggling to improve the lot of her fellow workers and members of her community, her activism has taken a toll on her family. She says that although she enjoys her work, it distances her from her family and she is not always able to attend to family matters.

Many other activists of Mhlongo's generation continue to move out of the union movement. It is too early to assess the impact that their departure is having on these organisations. Also unclear is how many of them will remain committed to the ideal of working for the improvement of the conditions of those they lead. What is clear is that the temptation to jump on the 'gravy train' remains very strong. But Ruth Mhlongo is adamant that she will not succumb to that temptation and abandon the people she leads. ★

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