

Accounting for the union

I was born in 1961 in Diepkloof, Soweto. I grew up there and attended Naledi High School. I dreamt of becoming an accountant because I enjoyed maths and accounting. However, with subjects being taught in Afrikaans, it was difficult to do well.

I did not complete school due to financial problems. My father passed away and I was forced to seek employment. The idea was to accumulate funds to pursue my studies. I never knew that I would become involved in trade unions as I was not into politics.

My first job

In 1979 I joined Metro Cash & Carry (Metcash) as a casual, working Fridays after school and Saturdays and earning R90 per month. In 1983 I became a full-time employee. My first job was as a mark-up-and-down clerk responsible for prices.

When I started at Metcash it was not organised. Some unions attempted to organise us but we did not think anything of it as these unions first spoke to management and then came to speak to us with management. We regarded them as sweetheart unions.

Organising workers

In 1983 Makhulu Ledwaba approached us to join the Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers Union of South Africa (CCAWUSA). At that stage he was at

Etienne Vlok and William Matlala interview Amos Motlalo, SACCAWU president and Metro Cash & Carry shopsteward.

Metcash head office and chairperson of CCAWUSA-Johannesburg. I was given the responsibility of organising members in my workplace. For CCAWUSA to be recognised, I had to organise 50% plus one of the workers. I did that and was elected shopsteward in 1983.

Later Makhulu would become COSATU and CCAWUSA president.

Whereas some people had problems understanding trade unions it was easy organising workers in Metcash because of the low wages and exploitation at the time. Workers felt trade unions could be their saviour. With CCAWUSA's introduction at Metcash the workers started engaging management. In 1984 we signed a recognition agreement and in 1985 we signed a maternity agreement.

Strong backing

The training CCAWUSA gave us was tough but very good. It meant we, as shopstewards, could deal with grievances and disciplinary actions. CCAWUSA also

taught us the role of trade unions and about the working class struggle. The officials then were Kaiser Thebedi, Jeremy Daphne, Oscar Malgas and Vivin Masina.

This training laid the basis for me and I occupied many positions after that. Within a year of being elected shopsteward I was elected branch treasurer for the Johannesburg branch.

CCAWUSA was the most militant union in the commercial and distributive trade. It organised mostly the youth and had an average membership of between 25 and 30 years old. Most of these were former 1976 students and this gave the union its militancy.

This militancy was evident in the three-month OK Bazaars strike of 1986. For the union this was a political strike which dealt with the arrogance of the OK management and strengthened the unity of the CCAWUSA members. We galvanised resources to ensure a successful strike. Other union members brought mealie meal and meat in solidarity. We also negotiated with the furniture companies not to repossess the furniture of the strikers who could not pay.

Split in CCAWUSA

In 1986 CCAWUSA split due to political differences. It happened because part of the union's leaders wanted it to adopt the Freedom Charter, a second part wanted it to adopt a socialist programme and a third part felt that it should not align itself to any political programme. The latter two groups believed the union was an omnibus accommodating all political affiliations and that the adoption of the Freedom Charter, which they viewed as the ANC's political document, could be divisive.

The split happened at a merger congress with the Hotel and Restaurant Workers Union and the Cape Liquor

Workers Union. The merger congress was adjourned because the affiliates could not reach consensus on the credentials. The Western Cape and Johannesburg branches then left the venue with the understanding that it had adjourned. However, the rest of the congress reconvened later, elected new leadership for the new union and adopted the Freedom Charter.

The Johannesburg and Western Cape branches got the news from the media and were not comfortable with it. They aligned themselves with the former general secretary and were called the Mtwa group. The other group elected Papi Ganare as its general secretary.

For three years two CCAWUSA groupings existed. The COSATU executive committee then made an intervention and brought the two groups together. At that time both groups decided to put the unity of members before their individual and political interests. A technical committee was established and all the issues that were supposed to be adopted at the launching congress of the new union were agreed upfront. A congress was called and SACCAWU was launched in 1989.

State of the industry

Ours is probably the most unorganised industry after the domestic and farm workers. The industry is very decentralised, ranging from restaurants employing three workers to large employers such as Pick 'n Pay. Employers are also not organised. We tried to establish a centralised bargaining forum but this failed due to resistance from employers.

Our problem is that most of SACCAWU's resources are used to engage companies in negotiations from January to December each year. This has made it difficult to concentrate on strategic

political and economic issues confronting SACCAWU.

SACCAWU is growing but we are grappling with restructuring and organising in tourism. The central executive committee will be adopting an aggressive recruitment campaign that might see us being the second biggest affiliate in COSATU at its eighth congress. This needs a lot of work and discipline among officials.

Shopstewards, then and now

The struggle of the shopstewards of the eighties was also political. We dealt with shopfloor, political and economic issues. Now we have a democracy so shopstewards do not deal with the same issues. Most of them think they are only shopstewards at the company and the commitment is not there. They do not always attend shopsteward council meetings and are not involved in the community and broader debates.

SACCAWU is engaging the SACP leadership to organise a political school for shopstewards. We believe this will empower and educate our members about the struggles of the working class.

My union duties

Since becoming branch treasurer in 1985 I have mostly dealt with the finances of the union. Nevertheless I was politically active inside and outside the union. After the CCAWUSA split I became national treasurer of the Mtwaga group. In 1989, I was elected national treasurer of SACCAWU. I occupied that position until 1993. In 1999 I was elected president. I am



based at head office full-time while my salary is paid by Metcash.

As president I have to report on the activities of the union and do the overall supervision of administration, finances and organisational issues in consultation with the secretariat. When necessary, I make interventions at companies. I also lead a team on policies and am part of the national negotiating team and co-ordinator for Metcash.

My life now

I still live in Soweto but have moved to Orlando. I am married and have three children. My wife works for SACCAWU as a regional administrator. We are advising our children not to take the trade union direction. I don't spend as much time with my family as I would like to due to union activities. I don't think this will lead to divorce.

I have no time for relaxing. I read but do not regard it as relaxation – it is usually Marxist-Leninist literature. I relax by watching videos on economic and political struggles and listening to jazz, especially American, African Contemporary and Fusion. My favourite artists are Keith Jarrett at international level and Sipho Gumede locally. ★