

“Against the stream”

I was born in 1964 in Ratanda, Heidelberg. I'm the eldest in my family with two brothers and two sisters. Both my parents were workers; my mother a domestic, my father a railway worker.

I attended school at Ratanda primary. From standard seven to matric, I studied at Makabenale High in Qwa Qwa. There were no real political struggles at the time, except for the 1976 student uprising. Students from Soweto ran into trouble in Qwa Qwa because the authorities were suspicious of anyone from Johannesburg.

Political awakening

1976 was the year of my political awakening. As a loose student organisation in Qwa Qwa, our struggles were around bread and butter issues related to student grievances. My first engagement with active struggle was when I participated in a student demonstration against the school principal who refused to accept us. We managed to have him removed. That gave me a sense of what the masses could achieve united and armed with a political will.

Whenever I visited my mother in Johannesburg, I saw two different worlds: black people lived in township shacks while white people lived in mansions.

My mother earned barely enough to clothe and feed us. We ate and wore left overs from the boss's children. The attitude of the people my mother worked for was patriarchal and down right racist. She lived

Norman Mokoena, COSATU acting Regional Secretary in Mpumalanga, talks to Malcolm Ray and William Matlala.

in the maid's quarters and could not drink from the same cups as her employers. We were not allowed in the mansion!

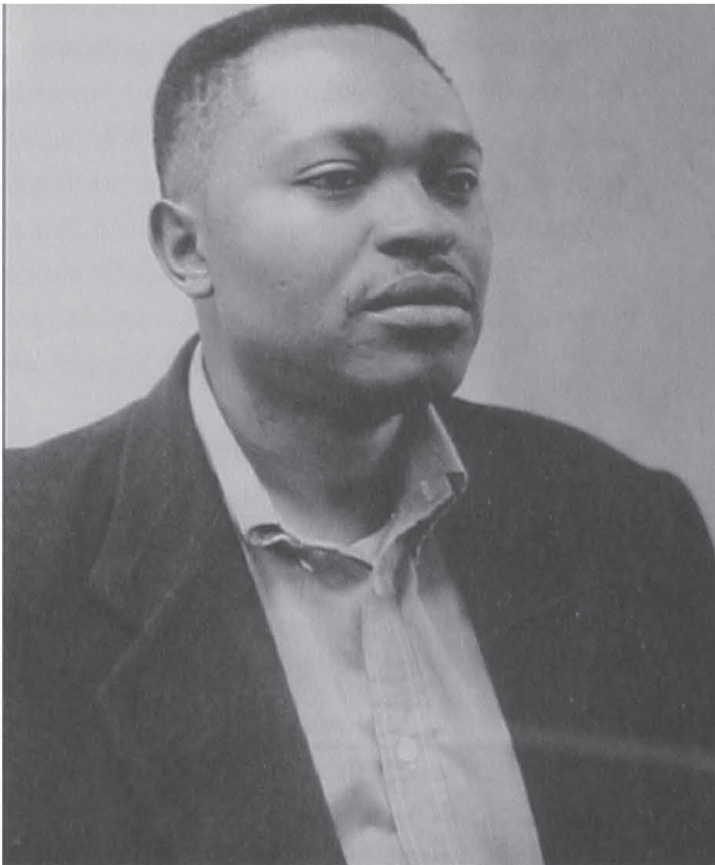
It was my father's involvement in the unions that made me see the system for what it is. He was a member of SARHWU. I remember the influence his participation in a strike had on me. I'm grateful for that.

Small beginnings

In 1983 I started work as a cleaner for Checkers in Heidelberg. After six months I was elected as a shopsteward by CCAWUSA members at the store. I was also part of SANCO and the struggles against the black local authorities and rent increases. Workers, many of whom lived in my community, knew this and wanted someone with an understanding of the struggle to lead them.

CCAUSA was a young independent union faced with the challenge of building a strong workers' organisation. We were working with predominantly old people who did not have a sense of class consciousness.

As a shopsteward my first task was to instill a trade union consciousness among



would continue to be, a mouthpiece for the ANC in exile.

Witch hunts

In 1988 I was elected as a treasurer in the Johannesburg branch of CCAWUSA. There was a lot of confusion. Leading comrades in the union head office were bent on silencing the branch and witch hunting comrades like myself who thought differently from them. Whilst some people genuinely had good intentions of wanting to build worker unity, others had political agendas.

During this period, SACCAWU was born out of a merger between a range of independent unions. Within COSATU, we were fighting for a new LRA, a living wage and so on. Politically, the issue was whether we should have a one-stage or two-stage approach to the socialist

my comrades by building confidence in workers to fight for basic workers' rights. That was not easy.

A giant is born

We persisted and established a cadre of activists in the store. We went out to other stores to recruit for CCAWUSA which eventually became a force to be reckoned with. Many unions were the offspring of CCAWUSA before COSATU's formation.

We began to organise Checkers on the East Rand and built a very powerful shopstewards' movement. Between 30% and 40% of CCAWUSA's BECs were from Checkers. From small beginnings, we emerged as a giant.

With the birth of COSATU in 1985 the emphasis of the struggle shifted from bread and butter issues to a fight to politically define COSATU. I did not come from a Congress tradition. I interpreted COSATU's birth as the embryo of a workers' party that would occupy centre stage in the struggle. However, the labour movement was, and

revolution. I held the position that revolution does not stop at stages. Socialism is a permanent and uninterrupted struggle. I believed that the class struggle would be set back if we fought for a reformed capitalist democracy first.

Against the stream

I came to a socialist consciousness through reading Marxism in a reading group in the '80s as a member of an independent socialist organisation. Because we were not aligned to the ANC we were marginalised. I received threats from union members in my community. My socialist convictions were stronger than threats.

In the late '80s SACCAWU was at the forefront of strike activity. Much of my time was taken up at the barricades, co-ordinating strike action not just within SACCAWU but within COSATU as a whole.

Faction fight

The Johannesburg branch of SACCAWU took a position at one of our congresses not

to adopt the Freedom Charter. Two factions developed around the issue. We split and had an absurd situation where there were two SACCAWUs in COSATU. This destabilised the organisation we struggled to build.

Eventually, COSATU intervened and appointed a commission of enquiry to investigate the problem. After the second appeal, the factions got together again. But SACCAWU has never been strong because of the losses during that period.

Politically, the reunification of SACCAWU was a patchwork of compromises which were difficult to manage in one organisation. Democracy was a myth in the sense that different views were not entertained. Organisationally, the two factions forged their own structures which fused when we patched things up. Overall, the reunification was a farce because our opponents eventually purged our best activists.

Dismissal

Checkers ran into financial problems and was bought out by Shoprite, which was notorious for union bashing. The bosses targeted key union leaders, starting with shopstewards. We warned our head office what was going on. Unfortunately, our branch could not take up campaigns, because it was marginalised by the head office. Head office did nothing

We went on strike in Heidelberg because one white woman insulted a black worker. Workers were dismissed. The condition for their reinstatement was that I should not be reinstated. If I had insisted on going back I would have compromised the jobs of all the workers. We were too weak to fight so I accepted. In 1993 I took a job at the Labour Research Service.

Defeat in victory

By 1994 the political situation had changed dramatically. There was a general attack

against workers and a wave of demoralisation amongst socialists. The election victory of the ANC was the beginning of the consolidation of a new form of capitalism, one that allowed black people to make big profits and exploit workers.

The fact that people who said they were socialists are now in government hammering the unions is a vindication of our position. Those who previously called for a 40-hour working week are now resisting COSATU's demands. These are the people who said that the uninterrupted fight for socialism back then was out of the question.

Power relations in society have not changed. In that sense the settlement in 1994 was a defeat for workers.

Socialism – the future?

I don't think I'll see socialism in my lifetime. I'll always be a socialist. I will continue to fight against the stream to advance the struggle for a socialist future. But given the compromise nature of the political settlement, things are more blurred and muddled today. There is very little work being done around the question of socialism, despite COSATU's claim to support it.

I'm still in the unions, but as an official. Things have changed since my days as a shopsteward when I directly represented workers. One is forced to adapt to the current situation. What alternative is there?

In the future, I see myself contributing to the worker struggle in a research capacity.

Home life

I have a wife and three children. My wife is an independent working woman. I want to raise my children with the values and ideas I still hold dear and hope that they will continue the struggle for a workers' government." ★