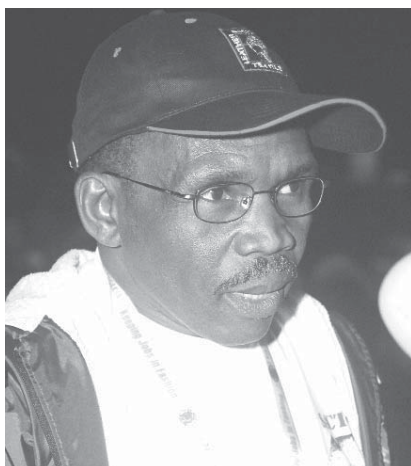


Andrew Mdeni Joyisa

Thread in Sactwu's rich fabric



September 2009 marks the 20th anniversary of the Southern African Clothing and Textile Workers' Union (Sactwu). To celebrate this event **Simon Eppel** interviewed **Andrew Mdeni Joyisa** Sactwu's ex-deputy president who retires this year and has been in the union since its inception in 1973.

Sactwu's roots go back all the way to 1918. When remembering this history however, it is important to look beyond acronyms and dates.

Sactwu is a richly embroidered cloth. The threads of workers' lives weave together to form the fabric of the union. Our history is the history of *all* members, past and present. This is why Sactwu has embarked on collecting life histories of its members. Launched in January 2008, the Worker History Project has collected around 400 life stories.

On our 20th anniversary, Sactwu wishes to honour its members for their contribution and commitment to building the union. We do so by publishing the story of Andrew Joyisa.

He is one of Cosatu's (Congress of South African Trade Unions) longest serving shop stewards and has played a very important role in building unionism among textile, clothing,

leather and other workers. Like other members, his history is an important part of the history of Sactwu.

“For the last 41 years I have worked at Aunde Tap. I was a sampling and safety coordinator. My company supplied the automotive industry and their major customers are Toyota, Nissan and BMW.

GROWING UP

I was born on 1 February 1946 and my mother farmed land in Umlazi Reserves where I grew up. My father worked on boats in Congella harbour. He stayed in Cato Manor so it was not easy to see him since he only came home once every two or three months.

Life was very difficult in Umlazi. There is really nothing good to remember about those days. My father earned peanuts; much too little to support his family of ten children! His low wages forced

my mother to seek odd jobs ploughing our neighbours' land.

At home we ate mealie meal and samp but we didn't always have food; sometimes we went to bed without eating. We also had about 25 cattle. They would give us milk and amasi. It was one of my jobs to herd them. Sadly all our cattle died in the 1960s. They contracted a disease when the apartheid government moved us to new land that had different grass. In the move we ended up losing our belongings, friends and our practices.

I attended school at Nwabi Primary and in 1965 I moved to Swelihle High School and I went up to Standard 9.

At school I was very sharp at mathematics. Even today I am good at counting. My teacher used to tell me to stand up and explain to other students how I managed to do my maths homework.

Unfortunately in 1967 I had to quit school as my parents couldn't

afford to send all their children to school. I worked for a short while in different jobs. Finally I was employed by Aunde SA, formerly SA Fabric, in March 1968.

STRIKES OF 1973

I have been involved with the union since the Durban strikes of 1973. They started in January when workers from Coronation Brick and Tile marched and demanded higher wages. In a few days workers from many other companies in Durban joined them. In the end there were about 30 000 workers who went on strike!

Sactwu



Jabu Ngcobo helped launch NUTW.

William Matlala



Johnny Copelyn, first general secretary of ACTWU.

To get 30 000 workers to march was not like it is today. Today the union gets the workers out but in 1973 it was different. Black Africans like me could not legally belong to unions. We were not even organised. But when we saw our comrades being brave and taking to the streets, we knew we had to join.

I was working as an operator, loading, running, monitoring and off-loading fabric at the winches and Jet machines. It was hard work but my wages were only R8.33 per week. When I heard that the Coronation workers were striking, it gave me hope. Me and other workers at my company talked and decided to take to the streets too. We had had enough. We wanted change.

We felt excited to be fighting to improve our lives. Every day we met at the gate of SA Fabric and asked other workers to join us. Then we would toyi-toyi and sing: Kudala sisebela amahala, (It's been a long time working for nothing) basebenzi masihlangane, (Comrades must come together) lelizwe ngelethu, (The country is ours) basebenzi masihlangane.

We also sang: Siyaya noma kunzima, (We are going forward even if it is difficult) Siyaya noma kunzima.

It was a big thing for us to strike. Me and other workers took the apartheid bull by its horns. We put our strength together and started the action which we believed would liberate us as workers. We wanted the right to belong to unions and we knew we had to push and push until the bull fell down.

FORMING NUTW

After the 1973 strikes, we felt our power and were motivated to belong to unions.

In the beginning textile workers did not make a union but then in June 1973 some workers were dismissed at the Frame Group. The Frame workers led the way to form the National Union of Textile Workers (NUTW). Jabu Ngcobo and others called the inaugural meeting.

Workers from SA Fabric and Romatex followed and we gathered at Bolton Hall in Gale Street in Durban. We decided to form a union with principled policies. At the top of our agenda was the idea that our union should be multi-racial. We also wanted to help change the politics of South Africa but we were worried about being too political. The Special Branch was arresting union leaders and we wanted to avoid that. But in the end we couldn't, some were arrested. But our pressure was successful and in 1978, Professor Wiehahn held a commission and opened the door for all workers to join unions!

I became a shop steward in 1973. My comrades voted for me because I was very involved in organising workers to join the union. I wasn't scared to raise the complaints of workers. They were behind me and gave me strength. They were highly motivated and mobilised.

It took ten years for my company to recognise the union!

In those days Aunde was owned by British shareholders. The CEO, Mr Kennedy refused to acknowledge the union. Aunde tried to subdue us by implementing a Liaison Committee. But it was just a rubber stamp for the bosses

and we rejected it. Then they introduced a Workers' Council and we rejected it again.

Eventually, in 1984, we found out the management intended to retrench some of the workers who had started the union. They thought we were troublemakers. But we demanded to be recognised and went on strike for four weeks. Finally management agreed to recognise us.

FORMING COSATU

After the 1973 strikes, the new unions got together to form Tuacc (Trade Union Advisory Coordinating Council) which later became the Federation of South African Trade Unions, Fosatu. However Fosatu wasn't the only federation and many of us wanted to grow it to include another federation, Cusa (Council of Unions of South Africa).

I remember it was my job to talk to workers in the churches about the need to form a bigger federation. I was deployed by the Working Committee to speak to the congregation of the Roman Catholic Church in KwaMakhutha. I was a preacher and I told the congregation that we needed a bigger federation which had to be non-racial. It had to be governed by the idea of 'one union, one industry' and 'one federation, one country'. It also had to be democratic.

Eventually Cosatu was formed in December 1985. The inaugural congress took place at Natal University. I was there. Elijah Barayi was elected president, Chris Dlamini deputy president and Jay Naidoo general secretary. I was happy that day.

MERGING TEXTILE UNIONS

In the late 1970s and 1980s there were a number of different unions

in clothing and textile. The NUTW was one, the Textile Workers Industrial Union (TWIU) another. The workers from NUTW and TWIU did not get on, although they sometimes supported each other. I remember that we all stood together to demand that June 16 was made a public holiday.

In 1987, NUTW, TWIU and the National Union of Garment Workers merged to make one union. We realised it was better to have one union fighting against the bosses than have workers fighting each other. Being together made us stronger.

The new union was called the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union of South Africa, Actwusa. The first president was Amon Ntuli and the general secretary was Johnny Copelyn. After the merger conflicts between workers ended. We were now united and singing the same song.

Even though we had merged, there was still another union for clothing, the Garment and Allied Workers Union of SA. Actwusa was affiliated to Cosatu and Cosatu insisted that it merge with Gawu-SA. So, in 1989, we merged to form Sactwu.

The merger took place in Cape Town. Again Amon Ntuli was elected president, but Lionel October became general secretary. Johnny Copelyn became the deputy general secretary. The inaugural Congress brought all workers together. We have managed to keep all workers together even until today.

SACTWU HAS POWER

Sactwu has been a powerful affiliate of Cosatu. It has set an example for other unions to follow. But we also face challenges

in the industry. Our biggest problems are the closure of factories from all the imports. The imports come from globalisation but we also have the challenges of privatisation and labour brokers who pay workers very low wages.

Since being in Sactwu I have attended almost all of its national congresses. I have also been part of many campaigns. It gives me great pride that I led the recruitment campaign for Northern Natal, Durban and Pinetown, and Newcastle and Transvaal. These campaigns were successful because we still have strong membership in these branches and regions. I also have a great memory of visiting a union congress in Canada in 1989. And of course, I have good memories of being Sactwu's deputy president.

For the past 36 years I have enjoyed being a shop steward greatly. I've learned many things, that unions are vital for workers. They help workers fight for their rights and become strong together. It is very important to maintain the strength of the union in the factory, in the industry and in the country.

FAMILY

I am a Christian and married with six children. Two of my sons work in the clothing and textile industry. Justice joined in 1994 and worked for almost ten years as an inspector in the Final Exam Department. Reginald worked as an operator in the finishing department.

I don't belong to any political party but I am a member of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. I am also a leader of Society Stewards, a group of leaders in the church society elected to lead the society.

