

Contribution to advancing working class

Numsa's Mtutuzeli Tom

William Matlala



On 26 August 2010 **Mtutuzeli Tom**, former president of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa laid his head to rest. The much loved Tom was president for 16 years although he had been a member since 1983. His intelligent, enthusiastic and warm personality shines through these excerpts in an interview with **Kally Forrest** in June 1997.

How did you come into the union?

I came into the union before I became a worker in 1974. I was a student. My father was a member of Saawu (SA Allied Workers Union) for a long time. He used to take me over weekends to workers' meetings. I felt that these people are meeting for something that is common to all of them. And that unity, that oneness played a role in me.

In October 1983. I was employed in Mercedes Benz (MBSA). They put me on a milling machine which is used in the body shop to drill and cut. Because my father was a member of Saawu I thought it was the only union. I became aware that there was another union and they were the majority, stronger than Saawu. I found out that Naawu (National Automobile & Allied Workers Union) was the progressive one. It had shop stewards who were giving report-backs. It was representing workers when they had a problem and negotiating wages.

I decided to cross the floor to Naawu. I stood as a shop steward. It was a disciplined union. If you represent this union at leadership level you must be democratically elected. It was discussed and the comrades agreed that I should stand.

How did you get workers' trust?

The manner in which I participated in discussions and went and asked to join the union. There were people who were neither members of Saawu or Naawu and I was able to convince them to join.

In the trains, talking about strikes to people that I don't even know. Bus stops, taxi ranks to spread the message of the struggle. The information I got from my father from discussing issues assisted me in understanding workers' problems.

In Naawu you had to motivate why you elect someone. My proposer said that I was a friend in that department. By which he meant that everybody trusted me. I was talking to everyone. Even

during knock-off time I would sit at any table at lunch time. Workers are key people in defining qualities of a human being. That's the thing that I respect amongst workers. Workers are capable of identifying a grounded leader and a charismatic, ambitious leader. You cannot just be elected because you speak nice things.

In the 1980s it was how you addressed workers on their issues; of making complex issues simple for their understanding. The workforce of the 1990s is much more educated compared to the '80s. In those days I had a matric, and there were workers who relied on me to identify their clock cards from the rest. They made interesting markings on their clock cards to identify their own.

Very old, some of them. They were the core of the union. If there was an enquiry I used to go and talk to them. They can't read and write. I would tell them that so and so has arrived late, what do you

think should be my argument. They would advise me, they would say you need to justify his lateness. You have to look at the factors that made him arrive late. It's useless for you to argue that he was not late. They would advise you to put a good argument and win the hearts and minds of the presiding officers to be lenient.

In those days as a shop steward you are attacked by the employer and by the security forces. There was no difference in the brutal manner in which you were dealt with on the shop floor or in the community. On the shop floor employers had managers, foremen that in the evening were acting as security forces. You worked with those people on a daily basis. He knows you, he sits in the canteen with you. He knows that you are not only representing these workers, you are also representing the community. He is capable of taking that information to the security forces.

The police would be chasing you, the bosses also want to dismiss you because you are a thorn in the flesh. The relationship with management in those days was survival of the fittest, dog eats dog. The only way of survival was to use your organisational strength to win something.

What are some things you did as a shop steward?

The foreman would just say to a worker on the line, you have come late today I am going to give you a warning. I used to argue on the line in front of the entire workforce. That was advantageous. Instead of getting a severe punishment, you would get a warning.

When you go now to an enquiry you are far away in an office and it gives grounds for the foreman to argue in front of the presiding officer. In front of the crowd of workers, as the shop steward, you would say give me that warning and you would tear it so the workers

saw that it was destroyed. That gives confidence to workers.

Solving conflicts amongst workers themselves. Workers are no different from a family. There is nothing that is confidential amongst workers, any type of a problem.

You have to be aware of some work stations and their relations with others. You have to go and say you cannot fight each other, rather use your anger against the enemy. The enemy is not your fellow worker but your employer who exploits you and the government that oppresses you. So problems used to be resolved by engaging in political debate.

If the employer discovered the conflict the employer would call an enquiry and discipline them. Our way to solve a problem is different from the way management solves the problem because management wants always to see a loser and winner. In the union we don't want to see winners and losers amongst workers, we want to see them coming together.

Workers would think that the union was a shield of defence. The unity that we have is going to defend us against the onslaught. Even today, when the union is not there, workers keep quiet. You can abuse them for some time but there is a breaking point when workers say I cannot go on like this.

We really changed the attitudes of the supervisors. We fought with the employers to develop policies. Anything that hinders those policies, we challenge management. Workers joked about one worker who saw a manager put on a new pair of shoes, 'Your shoes are nice and shiny.' The manager said, 'Have you come here to admire my shoes or to make cars.' The worker said, 'No I have come here to make cars, but I am just admiring your shoes.' The worker was dismissed for being cheeky. A foreman would never dream now of just saying get out of the door.

Tell me about an action that you particularly remember.

The one that comes into my mind is the 1987 nine-week strike.

Whilst we were in a national congress, we received a message that one of our comrade's houses was raided by the security forces. Three of us were in the MK cell. We knew that if his house was raided then the other ones would be as well. We had to break out of the congress and take a decision. We agreed that both of them would leave the country. Myself would stay behind. Then we came back into the congress and took a resolution to fight a living wage of R4.50 per hour.

We went back to the plant and mobilised members around this in a general meeting. My constituency at that time was skilled, every car went through us. If ours was out on strike, the others, paint shop, all follow suit. It was the most militant section of the plant.

We embarked on a strike, but the employers were very stubborn. It was an illegal strike, we didn't ballot. The entire community backed us, no scabs at all. There were about 3 500 workers, it was a big plant then and the entire plant ended up on strike. I was dismissed seven times during that strike. Management would say I can't negotiate with you while this guy is here!

Let me identify lessons I learnt from that strike.

Make it a point that it is an issue that is common to all workers. When you build the strike action, explain the problems thoroughly to workers, don't rush before the strike. You are not going to tell them to go out on strike. They are going to tell you.

Don't close the doors on negotiations. If you close the doors you are unable to measure management's strength, you are unable to see what management is going to do. At the end of the first session, make a point of saying you are still open for negotiations. The only way of not making them plan is



to engage them in negotiations.

Lesson number two was the unity amongst workers. Those workers were not violent. The company went 100km away because they couldn't get scabs from the surrounding townships because people knew that MBSA workers were out on strike for a legitimate reason. They dropped them in front of the factory gates, workers went to talk to them. 'Comrades we are out on strike, don't come here.' 'Oh,' they said, 'we didn't know, the company just came and said if you want jobs come'.

Unity was a question of commitment and proper organisation. After every day, shop stewards went to the union office. We analysed management's attitude and approach and we analysed members' level of organisation. We identified areas still lacking. What is dangerous for this strike? For example some workers found that this is the opportunity to enjoy myself. We would call them and explain each member is supposed to be here, so that outside forces cannot get a loophole to divide the strike action.

You are supposed to be in the workplace for eight hours a day. Use those hours to talk to members and make them understand the forces of negotiation and how they can spread the message of the correctness of

the strike to the community outside. Everybody in a strike is supposed to be an activist, supposed to be jealously guarding that strike action, ensuring that members sacrificing their wages is going to be beneficial to members.

Be prepared to listen to members, some are under pressure from their wives. 'I am unable to look after my child, go and pay accounts, telephone bills.' A shop steward must be prepared to engage those authorities. We engaged furniture shops, the post office, municipality in terms of non-payment of rents, telephones, electricity. We told them we are not dismissed, we want to improve our wages so that we can pay, convince them to accept it. Safeguard the interests of members. You win a lot of non-union members, members in rival unions are joining your union because you have done a good thing for them.

That strike was also an education. During the strike we used to educate and explain things to workers. MBSA was so dominant in East London. Its workers were in the forefront in the ANC (African National Congress), SACP (SA Communist Party), Sanco (SA National Civic Organisation), whatever. It was because of that strike action which resulted in members seeing that the strike does not end in the locker rooms. It goes beyond the factory gates to the communities. The better conditions that we are fighting for, the wages we are fighting for, is also in the community high rents, transport costs, food costs. Make it a point that workers do not create a Chinese wall between the shop floor and the struggle for a better society.

The shop stewards' committee was key in running the strike. Whilst we were negotiating with management the second layer leadership gave direction to the masses. That was assisting in the ideological fight with management.

We won R4.50. I was earning R2.57 per hour and in my Grade 3 I ended up earning R4.85. The lowest

grade was earning R2.35 and went to R4.50. We got huge back-pay, I was able to install electricity at my father's home.

How did the union change you?

I discovered there is another way of fighting with management than strike action. That of gathering facts about an issue that I am going to negotiate with management. You fight with them psychologically, you show them that through discussions, if you don't do this, these are the bad repercussions. Organisers like Les Kettleidas, Freddie Sauls gave me this.

I attended the launch of Cosatu in 1985. We organised our own transport as activists of the union movement in East London. We said it is going to be a historical launch we can't miss it. We travelled in buses, we negotiated for those buses. The formation of the federation meant bringing together the unity of the workers in South Africa. We suddenly saw this is the thing that is going to make our freedom quicker.

Numsa gave me a resolution to motivate at a Cosatu congress. Sauls said to me, 'This is a golden opportunity to go to that mike and speak. You might go just once in your lifetime so make it a point that you drive your message and you win the hearts and minds of the congress delegates, not just from your union but from the entire delegates.' When I went to that mike I knew that I must put fact after fact, nobody should come and make amendments on what I was saying, it must be endorsed as it was.

When the congress adjourned, I was standing there and I was saying I have made a mark in a contribution to advancing the working class. Because these people were all agreeing with what I was saying. When I went home I explained to my father what I had done, what the congress was like. It makes you to love the work that you do. Wherever you are you know that there is something that you have to achieve in that meeting. ■