

# Cosatu's Zingiswa Losi

## Definitely no sex pawn

In 2009 **Zingiswa Losi** was elected the youngest ever women office bearer of Cosatu. She talks to **Kally Forrest** about her past, the challenges she now faces and how, as a strong woman, she is determined to make changes in workers' lives.

### How did you grow up?

I was born in PE (Port Elizabeth) in the huge location of New Brighton. We lived in a quiet place; I was not exposed to the busy side of the location. Sometimes I would see it when we went to church in Red Location and I saw the real difficulties of people.

But politically my family was not quiet. I knew there was something not right as my elder brother and sister went into exile in 1984 and 1985. I also saw the *mellow yellows* (police trucks for arrests) passing by and I knew that sometimes in the middle of the night the police squads arrived and arrested UDF (United Democratic Front) leaders in the street and dragged them into the van.

I knew there was more to life than just going to school and church; the city was not what it seems. If my brother or sister called on the phone I knew I mustn't use their names. And I knew the security police drove white Toyotas and I mustn't answer their questions.

Then I heard students were burning schools and I learnt why so when I went to high school I joined Cosas (Congress of South African Students). In 1991 I became an executive member of my school branch and then I was a regional leader for four years. Later I was in the ANC Youth League leadership in the PE region.

### Tell me about your work life.

Between 1996 and 1999 I worked in the SANDF (South African National Defence Force) in the air force at Bloemfontein. I was the only female and black as well. I was a technical assistant servicing aircrafts and working with pilots and artisans. I fed information into the system, say on the Impala, then I provided artisans with their job tasks. I was responsible for what happened in the air; it was a huge responsibility.

There was still much resistance to change in the Free State. The experience taught me a lot. I experienced exclusion like I would greet and the (white) person would not respond, or I would salute a senior officer and get no response. Everyone would have a seat but we (blacks) would stand around in meetings. With the hangar doors in my section people would assist to open them, whilst I would have to come early to do this on my own. I could feel the racism.

Once I asked Major Coetzee, a woman, if after my maternity leave I could bring my baby to live with me and get a childminder at the base as I could not get a transfer to PE. She agreed so I brought my child. It was hard. I was staying in the female quarters of the

barracks. We had to stand up and be dressed at four in the morning for inspection and I would get my child clean and ready and sitting in her stroller.

Then a man came to talk to me and told me how much he loved kids. Then came the complaint and I was given 48 hours to get the child out. I was really disappointed as I had got the permission of the major and I tried to keep the child quiet. But the major was nowhere to be seen when I wanted her, she was only available once I had taken the child back home.

Nothing has been as bad since that job so now I can move beyond and not give up.

Then in 2001 I joined Ford Motor Company in PE and I still work there.

### How did you come into the union?

When I came into Ford I joined the union. I had no knowledge of unions but I knew they were in the Alliance and at meetings I met Cosatu (Congress of South African Trade Unions) and SACP (South African Communist Party) people. So I joined Numsa (National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa) in 2001.

In elections in 2002 I was elected as a shop steward. Some workers knew me from Alliance structures

and also I was active in the workplace. I would first attempt to resolve a problem before going to shop stewards. I don't agree with talking behind your machines and then staying silent at meetings fearing management. I spoke up in general and other meetings. There were very few women but I was vocal. I would go to the shop stewards offices, I wanted them to inform me.

I was active in Numsa structures and willing to be deployed and go at short notice to meetings. You can't be a clock-card shop steward, your duties go beyond four in the afternoon, you must sacrifice as a leader. I became a member of the regional finance committee and I was a regional education member so I started working with the Numsa regional education officer and also the national education officer.

At Cosatu and Numsa conferences I stood up and spoke and people began to notice me. I worked with Irvin Jim a shop steward (now Numsa general secretary) in ANC structures in the Eastern Cape and Wayile Zanoxolo (former shop steward and now mayor of Nelson Mandela Bay). Wayile especially helped me. He inspires me, his leadership, his pro-poor stance. I speak to him often on the phone.

William Matlala



### How was it becoming part of Cosatu's top leadership?

When I was elected as second deputy president at the 2009 Cosatu Congress I was shocked. I became a bit numb that day. The position was contested but I read the balance of forces and I saw them tilting to my side.

At my first press conference I thought, 'Now things have really changed. What is expected of me now? I have responsibilities. Everyone is looking at me, I'm not a normal person, elderly people are looking up to me.' I was struck by the size of the responsibility.

The challenges were overwhelming. I was deployed to Mpumalanga and I'd never been there before. Now I had to meet Cosatu affiliates there, and I was thinking, 'How are people going to respond. They will expect answers. I must speak up in Alliance meetings. I must be knowledgeable, and read newspapers which I never worried to read before. I must be aware.'

As a leader I was no longer in my own comfort zone, I was not just talking to my own union. I must attend provincial meetings and know the challenges of each sector. I must respond and not get involved and not be aligned in leadership struggles.

### Has it been difficult to be a woman in leadership?

It is quite a challenge because I am a woman. In the region (Eastern Cape) I saw how women were used. Their potential was not acknowledged, they were only seen as sex pawns. At meetings they only made coffee in the morning and picked up papers afterwards, cleaned the offices but that was not what they were elected for. So it was not only my challenge but all women's challenge.

Some women could not take it and were pressured to step down from leadership. It was all



about you in a relationship with one of the men, not about you participating in politics. You have to be vigilant and clear about why you were elected. You can't be labelled and then want to move out.

Then there was what we call the PhD syndrome - the pull head down. In shop steward elections I never canvassed for myself, I let my work speak for itself. But in the corridors there were things said about me by female comrades. They should be your strength and be there for you. Others even work with men to destroy you. Very few supported me. But you must always rise above this, and not go into the mud. You mustn't respond and get into the pocket of people who are not progressive. Leaders should not respond to petty issues.

At the Cosatu congress it was even worse. 'Who is she? How old is she?' You must just make sure that workers know you are a leader who wants to make changes. That's what they want.

The men in Cosatu leadership, at the first *bosberaad* (get together) we had a very open session. They pledged to support me, and whatever I was going through they were there for me. Their support has been amazing.



### Is your leadership important for young people?

Young people in the ANC Youth League call on me. I have spoken at many of their conferences. They know I can advocate for young people. They see that they have helped produce a young leader and worker and they can use me to talk about my experience as a leader. I also get compliments from older women in the unions.

Numsa has a Youth Desk, and we think it's important that young people have a leadership they can relate to. Some would have liked

me to rise through the union so by the time I was in leadership I was over 40 years old. But young people need a leadership platform and then their enthusiasm and energy can be harnessed by listening to those who came before them and learn things like how to raise issues and contain temperatures and that you don't have to shout and be angry to be listened to. And then older leaders will also listen to you.

### How would you describe your politics?

Pro poor. Politics at the moment are about your own enrichment. We need to improve the lives of others not just our own. I believe in politics that makes a difference in the lives of those who really need it.

Politics is not just about talking, saying things and then shouting 'Amandla!'. It's about doing things in order to put bread on the table. Theories are good but we also need to ask, 'What have we done? What have we improved?'

### How do you spend your leisure time?

I listen to the news and I like watching *Isidingo*, other soapies

like *Generations* I can't relate to. Reading is not really part of my life.

Doing nothing irritates me but I like spending time with my two children who live with their grandparents and I talk to them often on the phone.

I enjoy listening to music like Keith Washington, an American R&B vocalist, Lira, and Caiphus Semenya and Letta Mbuli. I admire their relationship, how they have managed to keep it going all these years in a life of glamour in the music industry. I'd love to know what their children are like, they must be grounded.

### What do you think are the main challenges for the labour movement?

Unemployment. When we raise this issue we are not being listened to. Public works' jobs are not sustainable.

Also decent work. Labour brokers are at the root of this inability to create decent work. Also foreign companies come in and mine our resources and talk about how they are investing and creating jobs and then leave the workers in a worse situation suffering from TB and asthma. **LB**

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