

Dipping banner to Chris Dlamini

In November last year **Chris Dlamini** passed away. He was a founding first deputy president of Cosatu. In the 1970s he worked for Kelloggs in Springs and joined the Food and Allied Workers Union. He was a shop steward from 1979 until 1994 and Fawu's president from 1979 to 1993. As president of Fosatu from 1981 to 1985 he played a crucial role in the formation of Cosatu. Here are some excerpts from an interview in 2009.

ON NEGOTIATING WOMEN'S ISSUES

One of the issues that we raised was equal work for equal jobs because there were women in Kelloggs, and they could operate the same machines, push the same trollies, but they were paid something like R7.50 per week whereas some of us were getting R12 something.

So we said we need to look at the question of equal pay for equal work.

We discussed this as shop stewards and we agreed that we are going to propose this as one of the issues in the negotiations. But before we go to negotiations we must get a mandate from the general workforce. That was in Kelloggs in 1983/4...

And then we went and convened a general meeting for all the workers. We introduced the subject. As shop stewards we agreed. During the debate others were saying we cannot be paid the same salary as women. Some of the shop stewards were supporting that and I said to them 'guys we agreed on equal pay

for equal work'. They said comrade Chris we didn't understand it but now that the workers are giving clarity, we cannot be earning the same salary as women.

I don't know where this came from but I said to them you work here and earn R12.50 and your wife works here and earns R7.50, the total is R20. You have three kids, you won't be able to pay your rent and support the three kids. Or hypothetically let's say the man dies and the woman is left to earn R7.50, do you really expect your wife to be able to bring the kids up with R7.50 when you were struggling with R20? They then agreed.

That is how the issue for equal pay for equal job was adopted and became a norm in Fosatu (Federation of South African Trade Unions)... We submitted this to management and eventually it was agreed and union workers started getting the same salary irrespective of sex.

The other aspect is the question of maternity leave. We talked about

maternity leave as shop stewards. We introduced it. We agreed in a general meeting, nobody opposed it. It was agreed that we need to submit to management and tell them that if a woman is pregnant she must get four weeks before the child is born and return two weeks after the baby is born but it must be paid.

We took it to management, on the agenda, the human resources manager at the time, he had studied at RAU (Rand Afrikaans University), he was the major negotiator regarding wages. It was him and two other white guys. He wanted us to explain what we meant by maternity leave.

We explained that once a woman is pregnant, four weeks before delivery she must go on leave but she must be paid for the six weeks she is on leave and her job must be retained, she should be able to return to her work with no hassles.

He said to us, 'What do you mean? You must have sex with the women and I must pay, is that what you are saying?' I said to him not necessarily



us having sex but a woman who is pregnant, irrespective of who had sex with her. He took his books and left. Our seniors intervened but eventually the leave was granted at Kelloggs. We were one of the first companies that we won the battle for women to be paid for maternity leave.

There were strong women but not necessarily leaders because men believed that only men can lead. It comes with our system and you had to gradually break it down because you could see even in your general meeting that you had stronger women than men when it came to arguments.

But the point is how do you bring that woman into the structure that gets into contact with the employer. So the equal pay for equal work was one way of breaking that stumbling block, that stigma and eventually we started to bring them into the shop steward committees especially in Simba Chips, the majority of the shop stewards were women. I remember at one stage, just before the strike in 1984, only one man

was a shop steward and he was the chairperson. The rest were women, very strong.

ON POLITICS

So in 1981 I got banned because I organised a strike in Telephone Manufacturing in Springs. So we were supposed to have a general meeting because workers went on strike on Friday and on Saturday... we agreed that we are going to have a general meeting in the township to discuss a way forward.

And I think Telephone got to know about that and they informed the Intelligence and... Neil Barnard came to Kelloggs and told management that he wanted to speak to me and then he took me to the boardroom and he told me that he knows, he doesn't want me to answer anything, that I'm involved in the strike at Telephones and he doesn't know whether I'm aware of the damage that the strike is causing the country in terms of telephone distribution and that I am banished to my home from that Friday 6 o'clock until 6 o'clock on Monday morning...

Now the problem in Fosatu was the question of whether we should be involved as workers, should engage in community struggles or not. Our argument with some of the comrades was... that's where politics are... well there are politics in the company because we are being discriminated against and paid low wages and we were having no rights at all, but when you get to the township that's where you don't have sufficient water supply, you don't have electricity, you don't have transport from work to home or from home to work. That's where... your activism should be concentrated.

Now Fosatu was saying no, because this would lead to what happened to Sactu (South African Congress of Trade Unions). Sactu

was actively involved in the work of the ANC so when the ANC was banned Sactu had to go underground. They said the same thing would happen to us.

So we said no, no, no... the struggle that we are fighting is based on what the ANC was fighting. So it is banned yes, we can't be an ANC now but we follow their strategies and tactics. Now it was a bit of a hectic argument and we never agreed, despite the fact that we have tried to explain to them that apartheid is just a cover for domination of one nation by the other and in that domination there would be exploitation, economic exploitation...

So yes, whilst we are fighting the economic exploitation, you cannot ignore the political oppression and suppression. That was the area which they did not want to understand or they understood but they downplayed. So at some point there were splits in Fosatu. Like for instance... the guys from the East Rand, [Andrew] Zulu, [Enoch] Godongwana, Sam Ntuli, those are guys I was working with.

They split from Mawu (Metal & Allied Workers Union) to form Ummawusa because of that approach... Well in Fawu (Food & Allied Workers Union) we didn't have that problem... all of us understood what we were fighting because I was already engaged in underground work. I was connecting with the guys from outside.

Fortunately in Fosatu they made me the negotiator with the international trade union organisations for funding. I used to go out and meet unions in Switzerland, in Sweden, in Norway, Holland, in Canada to talk about how they should help us with funds to run our organisation because we were a bit weak financially. So I would meet with guys from Sactu, if

I'm in Geneva I know there will be guys there. If I'm in Canada there would be guys there. The movement would immediately send somebody to come and meet me, and brief me and I would debrief him on what is happening. So I was well connected.

I remember when the chairperson of the Wits region of Fosatu was killed by *boer* [Afrikaners], they took him on the road and threw him inside the hippo and trampled on him until he died and threw him out of the hippo. And we decided in the meeting of Fosatu that we are not going to bury this comrade on the weekend, we are going to bury him during the week so that the employers should feel the heat.

And we resolved at the same time that... every death of any comrade or any student means a stayaway. That's where we differed with

Fosatu because they [said employers] have got nothing to do with this, it's the government, why punish the employers? We said, no, no, no and we buried him on a week day...

And you know what happened, the system [government] stopped trains from Dunswart [factory]. Trains could not get to Springs because they [government] thought if trains get to Springs it will allow workers from Kempton Park, Johannesburg to attend the funeral. But people still came.

We realised that this is becoming a problem. At the time petrol was being rationed. You could only get petrol during the week and there was no petrol on Saturday and Sunday... But we managed to go to the garage owners in the township and told them that the taxis would come here and fill up and you give them petrol, they're going to pick up our comrades in Dunswart. There was general agreement, there was support from the garage owners.

And at about 11 we were told that the trains cannot even reach Dunswart now, they stopped at Germiston. We went to the taxi drivers and said even if you have to get to Germiston please do, it's for your cause. We didn't pay anything. Taxi drivers did that and they were very cooperative and that funeral was one of the biggest funerals we ever had. I don't know if records of that funeral have been kept somewhere. It was a huge success... a stayaway across the whole of East Rand, from Alberton right up to Heidelberg, no factory work or nothing. So those were the successes of being involved in community activities, combining the two.

ON THE FORMATION OF COSATU

The Talks About Talks [towards the formation of the Congress of South

African Trade Unions] went on but they hit a snag because most of the unions that were outside, like Saawu (South African Allied Workers Union), like Gawu (General & Allied Workers Union), Sydney Mufamadi's union and Sam Ndou, they were movement [Congress movement] unions. Siza Njikelana, Thozamile Gqwetha, Thozamile Botha and all of those guys.

So they landed the support on the one faction of Fosatu that was pro-movement and that's what made these other guys in Fosatu to be not very happy about the formation of Cosatu... they wanted some of the guys to be kicked out.

When the UDF (United Democratic Front) was formed, you had unions like Saawu, like Gawu becoming part of UDF. They were then called UDF unions and they were identified as spoilers because they were very pro-ANC. But then with our support inside they were unable to kick them out.

And then they [UDF unions] made a mistake when we had a conference in Ipelegeng, when we were supposed to finalise the formation of Cosatu. We wanted resolutions on principles and policies and one of the areas where the UDF made a f** up, when they supported the principle of *anti-racism* as compared to *non-racism* because that came up with Azactu (Azanian Congress of Trade Unions). They thought that if they support that they will win the support of the Black Consciousness Movement, which was Azactu and they would form a bigger force within the federation and take control. And they made a mess because Azactu was a very small grouping.

And... our guys that were anti-ANC [within Fosatu], they moved a motion of dismissing them and expelling them from the Talks. So they were expelled the UDF unions, the Saawu, the Gawu. We were to

William Matlala





proceed in the formation of Cosatu without them.

I said no, I've lost my battle in the conference but I'm not going to lose it in the region. I went around and spoke to people like Zulu. I said comrade Zulu we cannot allow this. We said we want to form one federation, and no union that is progressive should be left out. We can't allow unions like Saawu and Gawu to be left out of this process. Let's find a way on how we rope them in.

He said comrade I agree with you, let's find a way. We spoke to the chairperson, we immediately called a regional meeting, the Wits regional meeting. We invited these unions and they came. Sydney was representing Gawu and some other comrades, Elijah was representing Saawu...

We said to them look comrades, some of us are committed into the formation of Cosatu. You know I made an example on commitment between a pig and a hen. I said a hen lays an egg and goes on with her life. A pig dies for bacon but the chicken won't die for the egg. So when you eat bacon and egg you must know that somebody died for it and that's a pig.

And I said... we as a region of Fosatu... would die for the formation of this federation and it should be all encompassing. But for you to play games and come in a meeting and say you support the anti racism as opposed to non-racialism, that is completely not ANC... You must tell us here whether you are for the formation of Cosatu or not.

They said, 'No we made a mistake

comrades. We miscalculated and we have in fact in our meeting resolved that it was a wrong move for us to support that. So we will be prepared to go back and support the non-racial policy.

And this message went through to all the big heads in Fosatu and those that were participating in the Talks. People like Jan Theron, from Food and Canning, this comrade from General and Allied Workers Union in Cape Town, John Ernstzen in the municipality and whatever union in Cape Town, Cyril Ramaphosa from NUM, Johnny Copelyn from Sactwu, Alec Erwin from Numsa...

They invited me to the Protea Hotel in a meeting in the evening. I didn't know that I was invited by these big hawks, I thought maybe it's just a meeting to finalise. I was grilled. I thought that Cyril is going to support me, 'Who are you to take a decision to change the resolution of the conference'.

I said I didn't change anything. We had our own regional meeting and this issue came up... and it was not my responsibility to stop comrades from debating, what they felt was within their right to debate. So if you think that I have sold out, you can take whatever decision you want to take but I cannot change that decision because more than 12 unions were present at that meeting... It was not an easy meeting and... there was no agreement.

But in the next conference they were invited, Saawu and Gawu and when it came to voting on non-racialism they were non-racial. They had no reason further to kick them out. That is how Cosatu was formed." LB

Chris Dlamini was interviewed by Brown Maba from the University of the Witwatersrand's Historical Papers Archive