

Divided loyalties

I was born in 1960 in Boksburg and raised in Edenvale. I have six sisters and one brother. My father, who was an artisan, died when I was 15. My mother is resident at the Ankor old age home in Germiston, which happens to be one of the institutions NEHAWU represents.

On many occasions I found myself toy-toying with NEHAWU workers outside the old age home, to the disgust of my mother and other residents. I come from an affluent and very conservative Afrikaner family, which says a lot about their politics!

Soul searching

I'm the youngest in my family. Because of the generation gap, I found myself questioning the conservative and racist ideas of my family at a very young age. As a Christian, I had serious doubts about the relevance of apartheid practices to my religious values and beliefs.

The contradiction between my family's allegiance to the Conservative Party, with its dehumanised view of black people, and my personal beliefs had a major impact on my view of apartheid. During high school I did a great deal of soul searching to make sense of my position.

It was a turbulent period. Freedom of thought was restricted and it was unacceptable to challenge the system. Even though Edenvale was a so-called 'liberal' area dominated by the United Party (later the Democratic Party), I had to secretly grapple with these questions without openly

Ben van der Merwe, a NEHAWU shopsteward at the Department of Labour in Germiston and former NEHAWU Branch Office Bearer, speaks to Malcolm Ray and William Matlala.

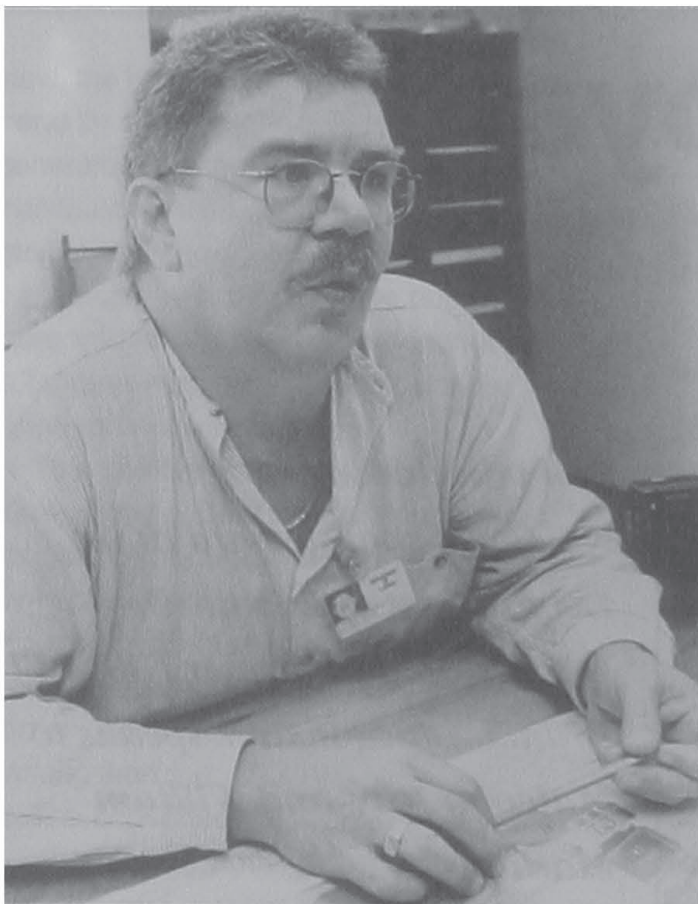
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sympathising with victims of the system. There were no organisations in my community that were open to alternative ideas.

I matriculated from Hoerskool Edenvale in 1978 and went on to study languages at Rand Afrikaans University. My academic career was short lived. I was deeply involved in the alternative music culture of the 1970s - a typical 'white' thing to do at the time! - and eventually dropped out of university.

Working life

In the early 1980s I started work at Ellerine Holdings as a credit manager. At that stage, the company served a predominantly black market. I was sometimes required to go into townships like Katlehong, Vosloorus and Thokosa to visit black customers who were in debt. It was painful to see the poverty-stricken conditions in which they lived. But there was a positive side. I was directly exposed to the lifestyle and culture of black communities. Households were run on



communal principles and family members supported each other in times of financial crisis. This was completely foreign to me. I was raised in a culture of individualism and competition.

The experience had a major impact on my thinking. I saw the comradeship among members of CCAWUSA at Ellerine Holdings as an extension of their communal lifestyle in the townships. It was therefore easy to identify with workers' demands.

Because of my position in the company, I did not see fit to get involved in union activities. But my sympathy with the workers' struggle and the progressive union movement emerged at this point.

I left Ellerines to start my own business and returned in the mid-1980s to work as an assistant manager. This was a period of militant struggle. COSATU was formed and workers were making their struggles more and more visible. I felt I had to make a political choice. I simply could not continue in a moral dilemma.

Shifting allegiances

I decided that I wanted the same things that other workers were struggling for. I was not above black workers.

The conditions at Ellerines were reasonable compared to other companies. As a white worker, my salary was not very different from black workers. But there were racial inequalities which convinced me that something was terribly wrong with the system. By 1990, it was clear that the election of the ANC into government was a forgone conclusion.

At this stage, I started work at the Department of Labour in Germiston as a senior administrative clerk. NEHAWU was recruiting workers. I remember being approached to join the union. But I had reservations, mainly because of COSATU's alliance with the ANC and the Communist Party.

I joined the ANC in 1991. This was not because I feared being marginalised under a black majority government. I realised that I could not preach one thing to the newly converted and remain outside the popular church. Joining the ANC was a logical thing to do. For the first time, I came out of the closet as an Afrikaner and openly identified with the ANC.

Union involvement

Management reflected the complexion and interests of the apartheid regime. This was the pre-election period and NEHAWU, along with other public sector unions, was getting militant. I found it easier, after joining the ANC, to voice my views.

I joined NEHAWU in 1993 because I felt that I had a contribution to make to the struggle.

Barely a few months after signing up I was elected as a shop steward and chairperson of the union in the Department. Workers felt that it was a

sensible thing to do because of my access to information and knowledge of how the Department works. I was also popular amongst workers because I assisted them with their grievances when the union was still unrecognised.

Winning whites

When the debate around the new LRA commenced in 1995, a new set of challenges confronted us. Winning white workers became one of the major issues. After gaining recognition, we stepped up our campaign to recruit professionals. My task was to organise professional workers and whites in the public service, hospitals and administrative authorities in the region.

It was not easy. White workers were not receptive to the union's ideas. They saw me as an enemy. Of course, NEHAWU threatened their privileged position. They would often ask me whether I was a communist. For them COSATU was the ANC.

We did score significant victories. I used my profile as a white employee in the Department to open doors. We also popularised our struggle against unilateral restructuring in the hospitals by appealing to white workers who were threatened by these changes. Many workers from HOSPERSA eventually came over to our side.

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A lot has changed in the past year. I could not have anticipated the problems I would face as a worker today. I occupy a senior position in the Department and I'm a victim of affirmative action, a policy which I support. On many occasions I applied for posts in the Department without success. The question I'm grappling with is how to reconcile my position in the union with the threat this represents as far as my career path is concerned.

I don't have the answers. I do know that I don't regret getting involved in the union. I

turned down a number of offers from management which were conditional on my resignation from the union. If I was to weigh the pros and cons, I don't regret being a union member. I think that it is far better to fight for a noble cause than to benefit from a reactionary system.

This is a transition period which requires sacrifices all round. I see affirmative action and the struggle to transform the public service as a necessary means to correct past injustices. There is no other way in which to remove racial injustices in the workplace. When all is said and done I believe my advancement will be judged on my competence and performance.

Stepping down

By the end of 1996, my responsibilities were mounting to unmanageable proportions. I was spending weekends in union workshops and weekdays organising workers in the region and attending disciplinary hearings. I was spending less time at work and my family responsibilities were ignored.

After getting married in September last year, I had to weigh my responsibilities at home and work with my activities in the union. After consulting my wife and fellow comrades, I made a decision to step down from my position as a branch office bearer. I continue to represent workers in my workplace. My wife, Louise, works as a clerk in the Department. This is where we met. She is not a member of the union even though she sympathises. It was her choice because she feared what her involvement in the union could do to our relationship. I respect her decision and if the tables were turned I would do the same.

We feel that we need to give our relationship a fair chance in the immediate future. I doubt that I'll make myself available for additional activities in the union. On the whole, I'm optimistic that everything will work out for the best. ★