

## *'Don't lose hope'*

**I** was born on 6 December 1960 in Randfontein. My father was a mineworker. We moved and I grew up in the Eastern Cape in the Transkei. I did all my schooling at Willowvale. I matriculated in 1982 and joined the multitude of job seekers. I searched for a job for two years and did not find any. I then decided, in 1985, to try mining.

### **Mining**

I started my working life and was introduced to mining at President Brand in Welkom. I had not been involved in political activities at school because we were in a very remote area. But I became politicised in 1985. I had been hearing about Cyril Ramaphosa on the radio and in the newspapers - they painted him as a nuisance. I was inquisitive and wanted to know more about the union.

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When I arrived at the mine - in July - there was annual wage negotiations. So there was a lot of militancy at the time. I was also influenced by this militancy although I had not experienced much of the work situation. I was spotted by the

*Tanya van Meelis interviews Kolekile Sipunzi, NUM regional secretary for the Free State region.*

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shaft chairperson and he encouraged me to visit the union office on a daily basis.

### **Discrimination and tensions**

Discrimination based on colour was rife on the mine. There were facilities that were only meant for whites - but the mine disguised this saying that the facilities were meant for managers, artisans and miners. There were no black miners at the time - miners being responsible for the crew that does the mining. A miner is one level below the shift overseer. Blacks couldn't share the facilities with them.

There were also tensions on the mine because there had been tribal or faction fights in May. People had been killed. I found it difficult to mix with the shopstewards who all spoke Sotho. But because I persisted and stayed with them on a regular basis, it became easier to communicate.

### **Union activities**

I used to visit the union offices regularly. I had a rare skill then - I could communicate well in English. So I was co-opted to write

the correspondence to management. In 1986 I was elected as a shaft steward and then as shaft vice-secretary. This was the beginning of my deeper involvement in the union. I was later transferred (in 1986) to another shaft, so I forfeited my position and became an ordinary member at President Brand Number 1.

After the 1987 strike, and between 1987 and 1989, I didn't hold a position. By the end of 1989 I was elected shaft vice-secretary and then branch vice-secretary. On 17 March 1990 I was elected, in absentia, vice-secretary for the Free State region. I held the position for two years and was then recalled to the branch because of a leadership crisis there. The mine barred the then branch secretary from participating in union activities. So I served as acting branch secretary until 1994 when I was elected branch secretary. I held the position until the branch closed and I was transferred to Matjhabing Mine. I was elected regional secretary last November.

### Leadership

The demands on leadership are different now than in the 1980s. These days leaders know more about legalities and dampen the spirit of militancy. Now, because we understand the laws, our actions are more focused - you can't allow members to do anything because the union will be sued.

These days we are experiencing mine closures and that is dampening members' spirit around industrial action. We are also under pressure to produce more and create jobs, but all we see are jobs being lost. Members should not lose hope and say that NUM is becoming toothless because there are no more strikes. We can't function the same way that we did in the 1980s because of the changes in the country. But that does not mean that we

are not strong.

I think that members must have respect for leadership but not treat leaders as demi-gods. Leadership is there to guide membership and should not be feared by membership. Members should use the proper channels to address whatever they want to address.

### Family life

I've settled in Welkom with my wife and kids. Being a unionist means that you have to make sacrifices. But you can't just dictate to your family. You need to discuss what you are doing and bring them onboard. My family knew that I would be doing a lot of travelling - for example, now I've been away for a week, I'll be home for one day, and then I have to travel for the union again.

When you have the confidence of members you have to keep going. Who am I to refuse to serve members. We work as a collective leadership, so I understand my comrades and they understand me, so we are able to support each other if there is a problem.

### Building NUM

When you are elected into office and you are not elected unanimously, you know that not all members are at peace with you. You therefore have to unite the region first. I say that I must serve everyone equally and in an unbiased fashion. You need to bring those who resent you

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from the election on board. You also need to create an understanding with the officials - they have been working in the same manner for some time. I come in

with new ideas, but I cannot force them down the officials' throats. I need to slowly convince them to change for the better.

### **Union education**

Union education is very important in arming us to face the challenges of today and the attacks on labour. The education that we get from the union and Ditsela shows us things that you can't learn at school, such as changing behaviour and how to treat other people.

As unionists we have to face lawyers and disciplinary hearings. If you don't have the knowledge it is disastrous.

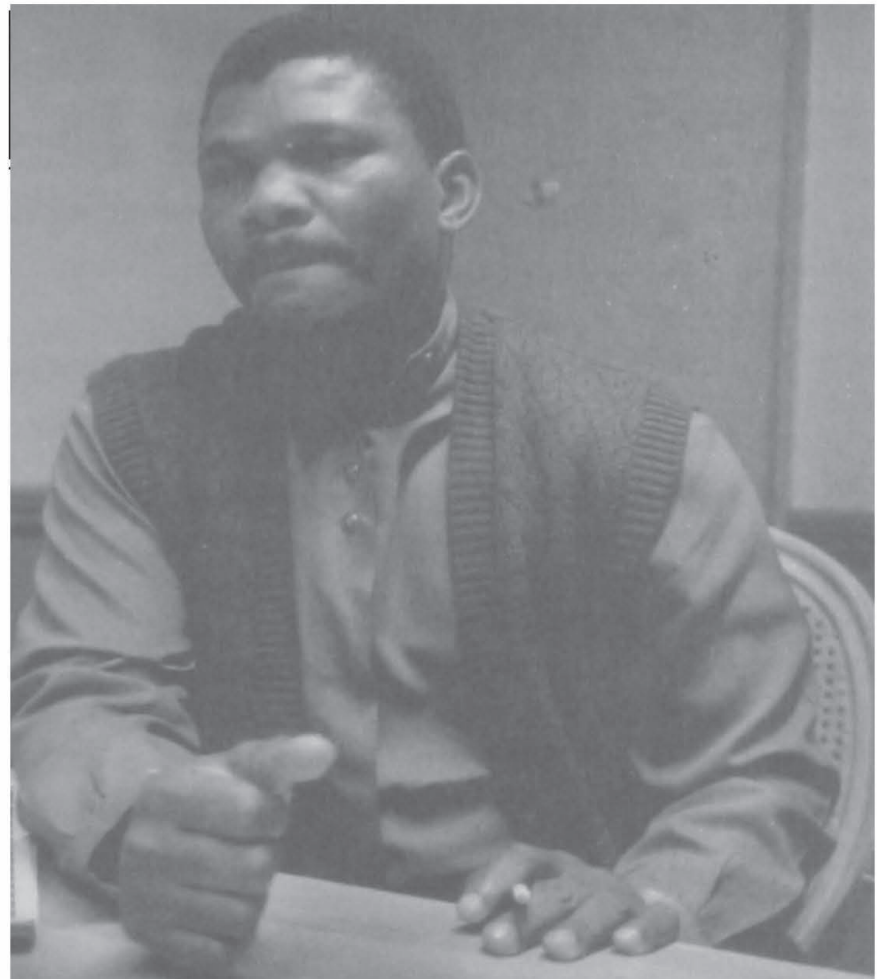
### **Co-determination**

Some structures like Nedlac and the Gold Crisis

Committee were established for good purposes. But, they have been toothless at certain moments. The processes don't always represent the views of workers because of a communication breakdown. We need to improve the way we are taking mandates. Although we may feel that it is taking too long, the taking of mandates from grassroots rarely happens these days.

### **Alliance**

People who say the alliance is crumbling are lying. To those who believe that the alliance is about to die - you are living in a fool's paradise. It was not a few individuals who brought about the alliance. COSATU's stand is that we will remain in the alliance. Where there are evils in the alliance, we will fight them - in the alliance. COSATU leadership are



within their mandate when they publicly oppose government programmes like Gear

### **Labour law**

The minister has made his proposals to amend the labour law. We believe that he is open to comments from workers and business. It is our duty as a trade union to deal with government as we see fit if it strays from the mandate we have given it. We put the ANC into power - we are proud of that and we will do it again. We will campaign for the ANC in the local government elections. Where the ANC has weaknesses, it is our duty to say 'you are wrong - correct yourself'. But we can't say this if we move away from the ANC. We need to influence from within the alliance.' ★