

**“It is sad to see that today, when unions are legalised, have the right to strike and to bargain, women are left far behind. They are not encouraged to take senior positions in their unions.”**

*Veteran unionist EMMA MASHININI, now deputy chair of the National Manpower Commission (NMC), talks to Snuki Zikalala.*

**D**uring the darkest years of our struggle, many women risked their lives and were separated from their husbands and children for the sake of the workers' struggle. It is sad to see that today, when unions are legalised, have the right to strike and to bargain, women are left far behind. They are not encouraged to take senior positions in their unions.

I am proud to say that I started the Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers Union (CCAWUSA) single-handedly. It was like building a house to give shelter to thousands of suppressed and exploited workers. My aspirations were fulfilled. Today CCAWUSA, which is now the South African Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers Union (SACCAWU), is the biggest union in the commercial sector. Women are protected in the workplace, have maternity rights and the right to bargain over wages and working conditions.

### **Early years**

I was born on 21 August 1929 in a back room in Diagonal Street, in the southern suburbs of Johannesburg. My mother hired a room for us to live in. My father worked at a dairy. I was

the third of seven children and the one with the least education.

I started school in Prospect township, not far from City Deep. My family was forcibly removed to make way for a white suburb. We settled in Sophiatown, where I completed my primary school. After standard eight I was forced to leave school.

In 1956, I started work at a garment factory, Henochsburg, which made uniforms. Lucy Mvubelo, general secretary of the Garment Workers Union for years, told me about a new factory which was looking for workers. I started as a cleaner and I then worked as a machinist.

Workers here were dismissed for no apparent reason. This led me to organise workers. I was slow, but my work was of a high quality. Maybe this saved me from being dismissed. Instead, I was promoted. Management was trying to buy me. On the other hand, workers elected me as their shopsteward.

Though we all belonged to the Garment Workers Union, we were racially divided. The whites, Indians and coloureds had an advantage as their union was registered and

could negotiate for better wages. They would fight that we should get the same minimum wage. Black union members would just wait for the outcome of the negotiations. It was really frustrating.

I organised go-slow strikes at the factory. We were fighting for a wage increment and a forty-hour week. And we won those demands. It was such a joy.

During those years there was accountability. Shopstewards used to collect subscriptions and not a cent would go unaccounted for.

In 1962, GAWU merged with the Men's Clothing Union and became the National Union of Clothing Workers. I was elected onto its national executive, a position I held for twelve years.

### **The birth of CCAWUSA**

In the early seventies, Loet Douwes Dekker, from the Urban Training Project, wanted me to form a new union for textile workers. Another offer came from the National Union of Distributive Workers (NUDW), which was organising whites in the commercial sector. What attracted me to the NUDW was the poor conditions of workers in the commercial sector.

In 1975 I resigned from Henochsburg and started as an organiser. Morris Kagan and Ray Altman, officials of NUDW and the Commercial and Allied Workers (for coloured workers) gave me moral and material support. Because of the Group Areas Act, my office in Johannesburg was in NUDW's name. I was given stacks of books to read about unions in the commercial sector.

The new union was to be called the Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers Union of South Africa (CCAUSA). My first days were a nightmare. I was used to supervising and being among hundreds of workers. Here I was isolated and had a union to organise. I knew nothing about the commercial sector but was determined to work hard and achieve the desired goals.

It was 14 years since SACTU had been active in the country. I started the union from scratch. In those days it was very difficult to

organise. Entering a factory or organising workers was a crime. I targeted officials of the liaison committees, set up by employers and educated them about independent unions.

Home visits and pamphlets were the most efficient ways of organising workers. My husband was with the clothing union and they had a car, which I used to visit potential organisers at home.

I was often arrested for organising workers outside supermarkets. I spent nights at Yeoville and Jeppe police stations. My pamphlets, which were hidden in my clothes, were discovered and torn to pieces. I was humiliated, insulted and called a communist. The destruction of pamphlets used to upset me. It took days drafting and printing, and the police took only minutes to destroy them.

### **Striking out**

Despite set-backs, intimidation and arrests, by 1976 we had organised 1 000 workers. We then needed structures. We elected Johnny Rampeba from Checkers as president and I was the general secretary.

Our union grew very fast, first among OK Bazaars workers and then at Checkers. Pick 'n Pay workers (mostly migrants) were the most difficult to organise and management was very conservative. However, a small nucleus of workers started organising from inside their stores. Intellectuals like Eddie Webster and Douwes Dekker contributed by giving education to our workers. Henry Chipeya, the second vice-chair, also played an important part as he was very bright and innovative.

During the first strike in 1977, at Checkers in Benoni, workers striking against unfair dismissal all came to our offices. Management was forced to meet workers at my office and the matter was resolved without dismissals. We then had a wave of strikes at the supermarkets. Employers who hated me were forced to negotiate with me at our offices. It was such a joy seeing women defying employers and standing behind their union. The union was involved in politics and fighting for democratic rights on the shopfloor and beyond.

When the Wiehahn Commission

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recommended that African unions should apply for registration, we did so but were only recognised in 1981. This was a great achievement.

When we were recognised, I was in prison, by then my second home. Trade union leaders always found themselves in prison. The aim was to cripple the unions from the top and to leave people leaderless as they did with SACTU. However, this time, workers were determined to carry the struggle forward.

Because militant workers were always coming to our offices when they were on strike, our landlord evicted us. We had to ask for shelter from the churches. In 1981, we got an office at Khotso House.

One of our first recognition agreements was with Allied Publishing. It was a union stronghold. By 1983 we had a number of agreements – with Checkers, Pep Stores, Pick 'n Pay, OK Bazaars, Woolworths and Edgars. The union had grown to 23 000 members.

Our 1983 agreement on confinement leave with OK Bazaars with the guarantee to return to work, was one of the greatest achievements. The 1983 Checkers strike in Germiston, because a white woman had been demoted, was also unique.

### From CCAWUSA to NMC

By 1985, I felt my body could not take it any longer. Detention and psychological torture had its effects. The union was now big and needed young blood. I felt I had achieved workers' unity and rights in the commercial sector. Workers were now better organised and a number of recognition agreements had been signed. I had played an important part in the formation of COSATU and workers had a very progressive and militant federation.

What really disturbed me was that there was now a power struggle in the union. Accountability and service to the membership was disappointing. Some people accused me of being a Black Consciousness sympathiser as I was advocating African leadership in the union. In June 1986 I left CCAWUSA. It was a very sad occasion. My heart still bleeds for that union. I then joined the church as a justice and



reconciliation worker, covering the whole of Southern Africa.

I am quite comfortable where I am, but my prayers are always with the workers. When COSATU requested that I should be their candidate for deputy chair of the NMC, I could not believe it. I agreed immediately. It was such a joy. God really heard my prayers.

As NMC deputy chair I am now forced to read more as I have lost touch with current labour issues. In the NMC I hope to contribute to changing industrial relations in our country. I believe that worker rights have to be entrenched in the new constitution and that business, labour and the state should contribute to the country's economic growth.

### Personal life

I am married and have three daughters and two grand daughters. I enjoy listening to gospel and choral music. I spend most of my holidays at home as I travel a lot. ☆