

One-man striker

Morice Smithers interviews ERNEST BUTHELEZI, Transvaal regional secretary of Food and Allied Workers Union

I was born in 1962 in Diepkloof Soweto, but my parents moved me to Zululand at the time of the Soweto uprising in 1976. My father remained here in Johannesburg, working for Exclusive Books. My mother had been a domestic worker for most of her life, but she stopped doing that work when we moved to Natal. I finished schooling in 1982 and then I moved to Johannesburg to find a job.

In 1983 I found a job at OK Bazaars which I kept for about 18 months. I joined the trade union immediately. That was CCAWUSA.

It has always been my view that we should fight corruption and exploitation of man by man. At the OK there was high exploitation and low salaries. I was keen to learn and to see that wages were increased, so I would attend union meetings. But I was not impressed with the way CCAWUSA was operating at that time. There were no factory floor structures. You would see workers meeting in a general meeting only when there were going to be wage negotiations. Other issues like dismissals were never really addressed. Many of the demands were not made on our own. They would just be coming from the leadership. Of course this is still the case in some unions.

The main problem we had was the racism in OK Bazaars. The whole problem between myself and the OK came when one of my colleagues was dismissed for an offense without being proved guilty. We met in the toilets and the changerooms to discuss the issue and agreed to go on a strike, but the

staff were scared and so we started a strike with only few.

One man strike!

After we had given our demands to management, I ended up being the only one who was not prepared to work! I was moving around the place engaged in this one man strike. I went on for the whole day, with management trying to talk to me because they wanted me to work. I returned to work the next day but things were bad from then on. In December I left because I didn't want to work in a place where the workers were so weak.

I then started work at Irvin and Johnson in February. I joined the Food and Canning Workers Union. Being a merchandiser, I was sent out to work alone at supermarkets to pack out I&J products. But I joined the union and I made it my task to try and encourage the other merchandisers to join as well. The workers in the factory and the drivers helped me to do this. We managed to organise 70% of the merchandisers.

In 1986 I was elected as a shopsteward. In 1987 I was elected the vice chair of the shopsteward committee in the factory and then I was elected as treasurer of the JHB branch of FAWU as it was by then.

Late in 1987, we were involved in a wage strike which was the first strike in I&J Distribution. It was one of the most organised strikes. We camped in a tent inside the premises after the company had obtained a court order evicting us from the canteen. Then in March 1988, I was detained for a short time under

the State of Emergency for my activities in the Soweto UDF Area Committee.

Then came 26 October 1988, the day that led to my dismissal with 16 other employees. We had observed the call for a stayaway in protest against the municipal elections on that day. The company felt that we had to be dismissed in order to gain control over the workers who had become militant and uncontrollable.

After dismissal, I worked temporarily in the union branch office. I was helping with recognition agreements and negotiations. In January I wanted to be released to go and find a job, but the office bearers decided that I should work for the union full time. I still wanted to be a worker. I liked participating as a worker in the structures of the union, but I couldn't refuse, so I worked full-time for the union.

In 1989 I was elected as the branch secretary in Johannesburg. In 1990, I was elected the regional secretary of the Transvaal and that's as far as I have gone.

So I have learnt a lot in the years since I left school. In fact I should say that FAWU has to be credited for what I am today because that is where I got most of the experience that helps me today.

I am a member of the ANC. I assist in the township in building other structures but because of the demands of my job in the union, there is a limit to what I can do in other organisations. It is my belief that I can't serve them equally.

I have been associated with SACP members over the years, though unaware of the fact. They have had an influence on my politics. In regard to membership of the party, I don't wish to comment. But I will say that I am grateful for the decision made by the leadership to open the SACP to all people, making it a mass party.

I believe that socialism has the answer for the problems of our country. But this does not mean a one party system.

I used to believe that a one party state would be good in South Africa, but the experience of the East has shown that if there is no opposition, you will make mistakes. In the situation of a one party state, debate is limited to members and thus it is easier to reach consensus without knowing the feelings of non-members. There were certainly many problems resulting from Stalin and from those people who followed his ways of operating. But the question is: how do we want *our* country to be run? *We* have to decide that.

I think we have to be careful of a mixed economy. I believe we need to plan carefully, but to be aware that we must always move towards eliminating capitalism. The mixed economy may be the starting point, but I am not that happy with it as a long term system. But we do need to be careful also that we don't end up with the destruction of the economy, as in countries like Angola, that arises from counter-revolutionaries.

The ANC and socialism: I am not too optimistic

I think the relationship between the unions and the political organisations is very important. Political organisations have contributed a lot to the building of the unions and the unions helped to fight for the rights of the political organisations. So the interests of both must be looked after. But in terms of the experiences of the East, each must remain independent of the other and respect the decisions that have been taken by the other.

The alliance is important in terms of fighting the struggles of the moment. Of course we don't know what will happen when the ANC comes into power. It may be dangerous for the unions to be in alliance with the party that is in power. They might end up not seeing the things that are wrong with the government and so the alliance will have to be reviewed. But at the moment the question of wearing two caps is irrelevant because you are not talking of political organisations that are in power. You are talking of organisations that are fighting apartheid together.

It is important that the interests of the workers are protected always. I am not too optimistic that the ANC will protect the interests of workers and that it will be in favour of socialism when it is the government. There are many different types of people who have joined the ANC. I think it is the duty of those ANC members who are in favour of socialism to ensure that in the next congress and the future congresses of the ANC to come, they put their views that will pave the way for policies that will make the ANC a party that will ensure socialist objectives. But I am not too optimistic about that.

Political changes challenge unions

The union movement is faced by a number of challenges: one is that of taking part in the structures of our society which has been under apartheid system. There has been a drastic

change in terms of the general political situation. What we have been doing in 86 - 89 is now changing because the ANC and other organisations have been unbanned and they are taking their rightful place in the political atmosphere. We may even need to amend resolutions that we have taken before in order to ensure that they meet with the new conditions that will prevail in the future, and to ensure that the trade union movement is going to be strong forever and to try and build the democracy that is needed. We must educate workers on the factory floor so that they participate effectively in the unions structures and in other organisations too. I have always believed that the trade union movement is the school of building worker and political leaders.

The unions were political bases through which people could participate in political organisation. But now this has changed. And we find that while we encouraged union members to be active in community and political organisations, we didn't stress the importance to workers of consolidating their unions. We did not guide them to show them that the trade union, even in a future South Africa led by the ANC, will still be necessary to protect the interest of the workers.

We are starting now to address that problem. Some workers believe that if the ANC is there, their rights will be protected and they will get high wages, that the government will say workers must have a minimum of R1 500. That is not the case. If the ANC becomes the government, it would have to take into account the effects of having a minimum wage of, for example, R1 500, based on the economy of the country.

The entire people, workers and capitalists, will be represented by the government. The government will have to take care of the interests of all the people of South Africa and so workers must have their own organisation to represent them in their own problems. Even if the SACP came into power, the rights of workers would not necessarily be guaranteed as it would have to cater for all the people of the country. Without the participation of the workers, there is nothing that can be guaranteed.

Bulletin articles helped members address problems

For FAWU, we have to face the problems that you have recently written about in the *Bulletin*. We are having problems, it is true, but it is to be



expected. All unions have problems. In some cases, workers have actually demonstrated against their own unions. But it is the duty of each and every member to see that the problems are minimised.

I believe the *Bulletin* articles have contributed to making more members aware of the fact that we are having problems in the union and to immediately address those problems in a constructive and objective manner. If it had stayed at an internal level, it may have caused even more problems in the way of splits. But because it came to the attention of workers, they have taken it on themselves to attend to it. Some people might think that publishing the story may have contributed to extending the problem. There is also the concern that management might take advantage of union problems being made public to serve their own interests.

But if the aim was to make workers, including workers in other unions aware, then it served a good purpose. Of course, sometimes it might be better to publish when a dispute is over and one can look back at the whole process and learn from it. But one should always remember also that often these problems are between officials, and not between workers. But they still have an effect on workers. ☆