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South African Clothing and Textile Workers Union  
(SACTWU) first vice-president FAITH MODISE  
speaks to SNUKI ZIKALALA

I regard my election as the first vice-president of SACTWU as a challenge. There will be enormous pressure on me as vice-president of the union, a worker and a plant representative.

I was not elected just because I am a woman. I believe it was my contribution and my vision that made workers elect me to this senior position. I do not believe in tokenism.

There are many challenges ahead. Workers' rights must be enshrined in the new constitution. We must have the right to collective bargaining, the right to strike and the right to intervene and participate fully in the economic development of the country.

Just as we fought for our rights during the height of apartheid, we should use our muscle so our demands are met on the shopfloor and so the future state will deliver.

One of the challenges is to build

confidence in women. Women easily get intimidated by their male comrades. Confidence-building can be achieved through education.

I do not believe we should have a separate structure for women or men. Our problems are common and we should always discuss them together. "Women's forums" have an inferior connotation – that is why in SACTWU we discuss "gender" issues.

### **Early life**

I was born on 4 October 1952 in Germiston Old Location. I come from a family of 11. Our father left when we were very young and we were looked after by our mother.

From 1965-69 I was at Matsidiso Lower Primary School in Katlehong. I started school very late as I had to look after my younger brother while my parents were at

work. Because of poverty, I had to drop out of school and seek employment to help my parents.

In 1971 I joined Gregory Knitting Mills in Elandsfontein, where I still work. I was fortunate to get employment immediately after leaving school. I was very young and enthusiastic, with no working experience.

Gregory Knitting Mills was one of the most conservative textile factories. Conditions of employment were bad. Wages were very low. Women were forced to work night shift with minimal pay. Employers had the final word on everything, even on our lives. We worked like slaves. We knew nothing about unions and a living wage.

Because of the closed-shop agreement the company had with the National Garment Workers Union (NGWU), we were all forced to be members. Though we paid subscriptions to NGWU we were never introduced to it formally and the officials never visited us or took up pertinent issues.

### **Involvement in trade union work**

Through Halton Cheadle we learnt the ABC of trade union work. I started organising workers into the ranks of the NUTW. When NGWU officials heard there was a rival union at our factory, they tried to become more active. But by that time workers were already on our side and we were servicing them much better.

I knew nothing about unions, but through regular contact with our senior union officials and the training with which they

provided us, I was able to handle disputes.

Contradictions emerged as NGWU officials tried to compete with the NUTW. They demanded we cease contact with our union and abide by NGWU's rules. We were opposed to that as it was NUTW which was fighting against arbitrary dismissals, low wages and bad conditions of work, and for

maternity rights and a ban on night shift for women.

### **From shopfloor struggle to community-based politics**

In 1983, I was elected vice-chairperson of the East Rand shopsteward council. As a unionist and a resident of Katlehong, I could not divorce myself from community-based struggles.

### **From NUTW to ACTWUSA**

Having established strong

organisational structures, we strived for unity of textile workers. In 1987 NGWU merged with the Textile Workers Union and NUTW to form the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union of South Africa (ACTWUSA).

Things changed for the better. There was co-ordination and solidarity at plant level. Common issues were resolved nationally and this was a victory for the working class. In 1989, ACTWUSA merged with the Garment and Allied Workers Union to form the South African Clothing and Textile Workers Union (SACTWU).

With the formation of SACTWU, workers' issues at plant level became a focus of attention. Education of workers and

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shopstewards on trade union rights was intensified. Emphasis was put on accountability, training and worker representatives.

Despite the low level of education, especially from the side of women, we have managed to inculcate confidence among workers. They now know their rights at plant level. Employers, especially at Gregory Knitting Mills, have changed. They know that without consulting workers on fundamental issues that affect them in terms of production, there will be no progress at all.

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### **Shopsteward role no longer a challenge**

Since the unbanning of the ANC and other political parties, things have changed dramatically. Trade unions are now co-operating to a limited extent with management. There are now bipartite or tripartite talks between capital, labour and the state. Shopstewards can negotiate time off with their managers. Subscription fees are no longer collected but sent to our offices. One is no longer organising workers; they join the union.

Workers know their rights. We have succeeded after a battle to get maternity leave, and to ban night shift for women. Because they feel secure, workers no longer attend shopfloor meetings as they know the union is there to defend them. That comradely spirit and *umdladla* (militancy) is gradually waning.

I still enjoy my role as a shopsteward because I am still challenging workers' problems. Although, as trade union work is being minimised, I find myself dealing with social issues, even family-related problems.

### **Working with mandates**

As a shopsteward, I have tried my level best to work with mandates. It is important to carry workers along. They must have a say



in whatever I am doing. Since I am elected by them, I am subject to their decisions.

I would hate to see myself not carrying out workers' mandates. After every conference or negotiation, one has to report back. It is disturbing and unethical if workers have to hear about resolutions which affect them from others.

I have tried to inform workers about the developments taking place in the union and in the company itself.

### **Family and social life**

I am a widow with four children. I spend my weekends attending union meetings, conferences and workshops. It is difficult to be with the children, as I am always on the road, attending union and civic meetings. It is quite exhausting to sit in all these meetings and later cook and supervise your children's school work. My social life is very limited. ☆