

# As a full time shop steward, I am always in touch with the workers

**GODFREY OLIPHANT** second vice president of COSATU and senior member of NUM talks to Snuki Zikalala.

I was born on 27 March 1959 in Warrenton, 70 km from Kimberley. I come from a family of eight and we were all brought up and educated by mother who was a domestic worker. Life was not that easy, it was an uphill struggle.

I finished my primary education in 1974 at Warrenton, and then went to Huhudi High school in Vryburg, where my political orientation and activity started. I matriculated in 1979 and worked at Edgars as a storeman. In 1980 I joined the Finsch diamond mine, which is 165 km from Kimberley and that is where I am employed as a full time shop steward.

## **Encounter with realities of life**

Joining the mine was an eye opener. It was only when I was in the mine that I learnt what life was. The appalling living and conditions of workers at Finsch mine made me determined to change and better the life of mine workers.

Life in the mines was oppressive and depressing. Workers were afraid to discuss anything that had to do with politics or confrontation with the management. But with our militancy from school, we decided to change things.

First we rallied workers around the commemoration of May Day and June 16. When workers responded positively by coming out in support of our initiatives, we saw that there was potential. Workers were getting

ready and fear was gradually being removed. We then prepared them for strike actions.

## **Union activity**

In 1980, management increased wages for the black work force without consultation. Trade unions then were for whites only. For us in the mines there was only a Works Committee, which was a conveyor belt for the management. NUM was not yet formed. But we exploited the wage increase and rallied workers to demand a 50% increase for all the workers. The response was positive.

Management played into our hands. They refused to talk or consider our demands. We had no other alternative but to embark on a strike. About one to two thousand workers stayed away from work for two weeks. One thing I remember vividly was that the then general manager, K G Hardley cried in front of the workers, begging them to go back to work. He said that for the past twenty years, he had never seen or experienced such mass action.

The whole work force was dismissed and selectively re-employed. Management then arranged that we should join the Boilermakers Union, which extended its membership to blacks in 1981. Their strategy was that we should be under the control of a toothless union, so that it should control our actions. We decided to join that union and then to work from within it.

But we got frustrated in the white Boilermakers Union. Workers were not participating in any decision making. To us it was more like a life insurance company. Officials never consulted with us, they only came to tell us what they had already agreed with management.

Though NUM was formed in 1982, in the Northern Cape it was initially difficult to establish contact with its organisers. I must say that we were fortunate that comrade Mannie Dipitso, who joined NUM in 1985 ensured that the Northern Cape was given attention.

Intensive organisation started immediately, and by 1986, we were able to sign a recognition agreement with De Beers. In 1988, I was elected as a full time shop steward, a position I am still holding in the mine.

As a full time shop steward I am always in touch with the workers. On a daily basis I am fully engaged in looking into their cases, attending to their immediate demands and the training of shop stewards. Basically, if I am not in Johannesburg doing COSATU work, I am with the workers. I have not lost touch with the people I represent.

I am also a member of the REC of NUM and after the election to the COSATU position I became an ex-officio member of the NEC of NUM. In 1988, I was elected as COSATU regional chairperson for the Northern Cape and Orange Free State region, which is the biggest region.

### **Responsibilities in COSATU**

In COSATU, as office bearers, we are given certain tasks. I am charged with the responsibility of seeing that the education department has a dynamic programme that will educate and inform the membership about a broad range of issues.

The overall thing that we are looking at as COSATU, is the restructuring of the federation and the re-alignment of forces to meet the new challenges.

One of the challenges which features prominently in COSATU at the moment is negotiations, more especially economic negotiations.

We are presently engaged in two levels of education. We are looking at the macro education and its impact in the country, and the question of distant learning, how it can be efficiently organised. We would like to give more knowledge to our members so they can understand what we are engaged in as a labour movement, and we are also geared towards improving our administrators in terms of giving them more skills.

### **Involvement in political activities**

Prior to February 1990, I was fully involved in political activities. During that time, the main thrust of COSATU was also to take up political issues. This was mainly because the ANC and SACP were banned and there was mass repression. The need became even greater after the clampdown on COSATU in 1986 and the later banning of organisations like UDF. At that stage already, I personally got involved in ANC activities.

After the unbanning of the ANC, I became involved in the interim leadership of the organisation at regional level. I am still a member of the region.

Presently, however, there is a decline in political activity. Workers are no longer that enthusiastic as were before.

My own view is that after the unbanning of political organisations, there was a bit of a lull, and workers are now sitting back. We seem to be putting all our hope on the current negotiations, watching with our arms folded.

While I acknowledge that negotiations are part of the struggle, I am also of the opinion that, in our political organisations, we have lost touch with the membership on political issues. This imbalance must be rectified, especially in CODESA.

### **Not leaving the masses behind**

COSATU is fully involved in CODESA, though this is done through our alliance structures. In the working groups of the ANC and the SACP, COSATU has its representatives who are looking at after the interests of the workers.

The CEC has appointed two officials to

work in the working groups of the alliance. They go as part of the alliance, but they represent COSATU's agenda. Their task is to see to it that workers rights are entrenched in the new constitutional dispensation.

In my view, through CODESA we have lost touch with our memberships, in terms of what is happening behind those closed curtains. While it is true that negotiations are part of the struggle, we need to guard against leaving the masses behind.

Solutions to this problem are being looked into by the constitutional structures as well as the task forces. Ideally, I would say that people who participate anywhere on behalf of the workers in COSATU must report back to the structures.

After democratic elections, the issue of an alliance with political parties like the ANC and the SACP will have to be debated, especially as it is acknowledged that it is mainly a strategic alliance. As a trade union movement we want to maintain our independence. If the ANC is the government of the future, we will almost certainly have differences with them. And the ANC knows that. The new situation will demand new approaches.

### Exposure to the outside world

I have travelled extensively. I have been to Libya, Sweden, Great Britain and Germany. I was quite taken with the Swedish model. The Swedes have put a lot of effort into trade union education. Workers have taken the responsibility to fund educational projects. For years, the system of 1% subs has been working effectively, and this has influenced us in NUM to adopt the same system.

I am now reading a lot about such concepts as the social contract. We used to be afraid to mention a word about social contracts. But I feel we can't avoid this discussion any more. We need to encourage workers to debate such concepts.

### On COSATU and ICFTU

I also had the opportunity of attending an ICFTU meeting in Switzerland. I was there as a COSATU delegate and had observer status.

At the moment, discussions are going on as



to whether we should affiliate to ICFTU or not. Most of our unions are getting a lot of support from the ICFTU. Some of our affiliates still feel that our affiliation to ICFTU as COSATU is not an option at this stage. But that issue will be examined at a workshop that we are going to have soon, where we will be formulating our international policy.

There are many different attitudes towards the ICFTU. Some of our own allies are moving towards affiliating to ICFTU. We will look carefully at the issue, as COSATU, and decide what the best strategy should be.

### My life and work

I am married, and have two daughters and a boy. When I got married in 1986, I was deeply in the underground structures of the liberation movement and I was hardly at home.

At times I feel that I need to spend weekends with my family, which is a rare thing. If I get a free weekend, I spend to the maximum with my family. I also make use of the opportunity of meetings here in Johannesburg. If I am driving, I bring my family with me, do COSATU or NUM business, and be with them after that. This is how I complement my absence at home. ☆