

'Hungry to join a union'

I was born in Mqanduli, in Transkei, Eastern Cape. I am the only son in a family with four children. My father passed away in 1998. He worked in Vereeniging. He was one of the group that burnt their pass books in 1960. As a result, he nearly lost his life.

My mom looks after the home in the Eastern Cape. I have three sisters. They are all married and living with their families. We are the type of people who like their origin. We do not want to leave our land and then claim it back thereafter.

I have six children, three boys and three daughters - the last two are twins. My kids are quite grown up: two boys and a girl are already in tertiary education, the third boy is in high school and my twin daughters are in standard two [grade four]. My wife is a teacher down in the Eastern Cape. She has supported me through everything. At times, I am away from home for almost a month. Yet, she takes care of my children and family.

Growing up in Mqanduli

Growing up in Mqanduli, I was a herd-boy, looking after the cattle. I used to enjoy that very much. I wish I could go back to my youth. Then, I did not have the responsibility of waking up in the morning to go to work. Rather, I had the pleasure of looking at nature's beauty. That beauty makes me go back to the Eastern Cape

Sarab Mosoetsa and William Matlala interview Joseph Maqbekeni, deputy president of NACTU.

during my vacations and public holidays. When I am on leave, I switch off my cell-phone and never read any newspapers for two weeks.

I did my schooling in the Eastern Cape, from lower primary to standard eight [grade 10]. I used to play rugby at school. There was a national team for Blacks then called the Leopards but we boycotted it because it was a creation of apartheid. In standard nine and ten [grades 11 and 12], I attended St John's College in Umtata. I was fortunate because I was academically very strong. This meant I did not have to use my family's resources for education. The Catholic Church assisted me by giving me a bursary.

In 1974, a theology college from Fort Hare moved to Umtata, next to my school. Students from that college used to come to St John's College at night to tell us what is happening behind the scenes. That is how I started to be politically involved.

My first job

After completing my matric, Volkskas bank recruited me, together with four other

comrades, to be bank tellers. They were introducing a plan of employing African people but only as a form of window dressing. The wages were not good and discrimination was very common.

During those years, the 1970s, black unions were not recognised and so could not represent anyone. From the little political education I got from St John's College, I knew I was not going to work for Volkskas for long.

1976

I remember in 1976, my first year of work, I was in Umtata in the old homeland. There were uprisings against the use of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction. My friends and I used to go to the schools to address students on political issues. We were also against the use of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction. We felt the pains of discrimination and knew that we needed to do something.

Joining SACWU

I then joined the chemical industry in 1980, working for AECI in Sasolburg. In 1981, after working there for just one year, SACWU recruited us into the union. I was hungry to join a trade union. Six months later, I was elected as one of the first SACWU shopstewards at AECI in Sasolburg. I had a membership of about 400 in that department.

In 1986, I was elected as secretary of the union in that particular workplace. I was a link between the company and the union. I then moved on, while still working for AECI, to be a SACWU branch secretary. During that time, the union trained me through workshops inside the country and abroad.

I became increasingly active in SACWU, so much so that in December 1990 NACTU affiliates recognised my capability. They elected me as deputy president of

NACTU. I replaced Patricia de Lille who was leaving for politics. I still hold this position in NACTU and still also work as a full-time trade union representative at AECI. In 1994, I was elected as president of SACWU.

My dream

To have been involved, to have participated, and to have contributed during the days of the Council of Unions of South Africa (CUSA), makes one feel great. This is especially so when CUSA changed its name to NACTU in 1986.

However, I was a bit disappointed when the Federation of South African Trade Union (FOSATU) and CUSA did not form one labour movement. I was one of those people involved in the negotiations. It was our dream, and still is my dream, that one day we will have one giant federation in this country, looking after the interests of all workers.

We need to seriously think about how we ensure that we indeed work together. We must look at building power for the working people so we are a force to be reckoned with.

Internal education

We still need to do a lot of internal education amongst our own members and managers about our unions. There are those managers that still treat unions today the way they did in the 1980s. Unions themselves need to educate one another for the good of this country, for the good for our members, and for the good of our kids who are still growing up.

Other duties

SACWU is very involved in the Workplace Challenge Initiative, and I was given a chance to drive that. It is my belief that the Workplace Challenge is a good project, with which all the unions need to engage.

We should forget about talking profits and creating more wealth. The liberalisation of our economy and the lowering of tariff barriers is certainly a challenge for all of us. We need to have more Workplace Challenge projects and encourage unions and companies to go that route.

I also represent NACTU at Nedlac in the labour market chamber and in the negotiations around the labour legislation amendments.

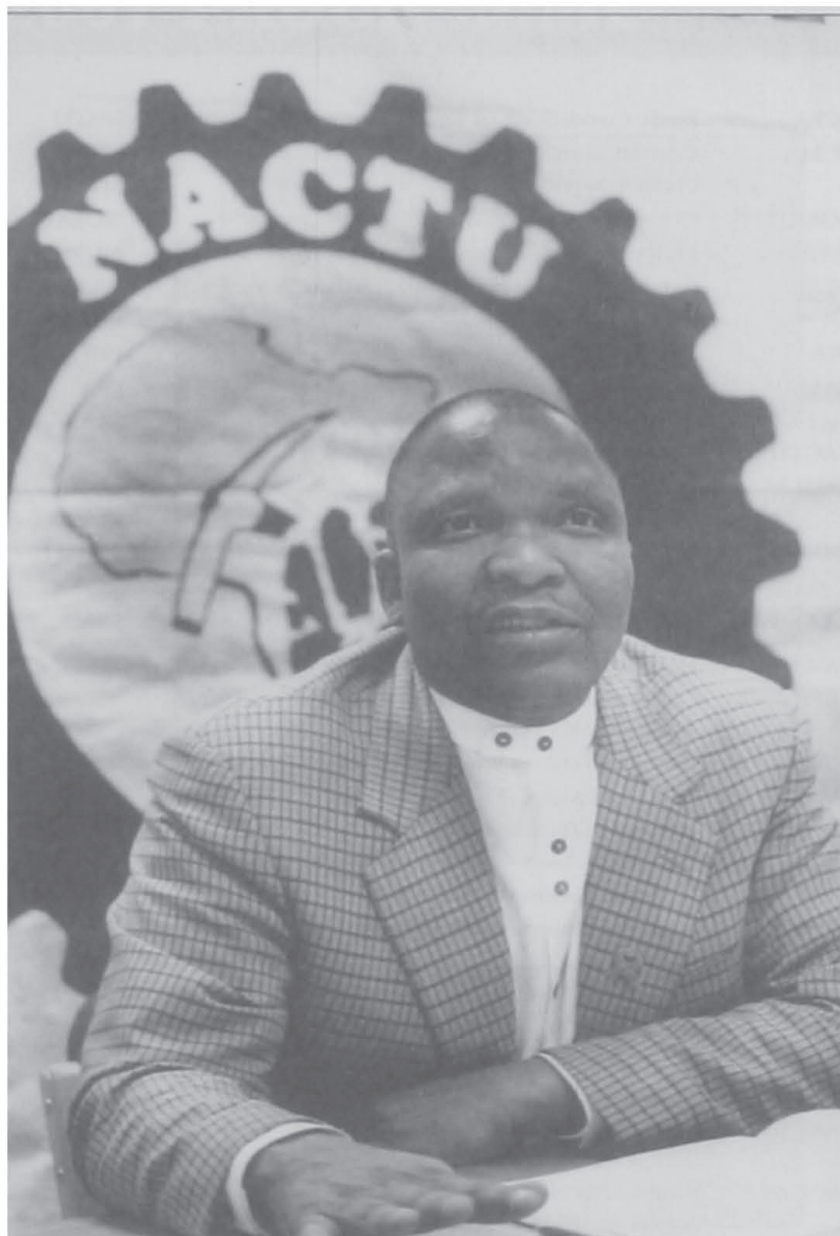
I have also been serving on the South African AIDS Council chaired by deputy president Jacob Zuma. I think the challenge facing South Africa is how we improve HIV/AIDS awareness and treatment. Government policies are there but government needs to put in place resources to implement and monitor the policies. I have also taken the initiative of ensuring that all workplaces have condoms for the workers.

NACTU today

NACTU has been growing in the past two years. Our membership has increased to about 550 000. Unions affiliated to NACTU are growing and new unions are joining the federation. The federation has a small number of affiliates but these are very strong, especially in the public sector, like the teachers union, PEWU and the National Public Sector Workers Union.

Contribute from within

NACTU has contributed a lot to the well being of our people but I still haven't



completed my mission. There are many job offers and opportunities for me given my experience - 20 years of experience is not child's play. I don't see myself going to government or the private sector because, although the unions have skilled and experienced people, they still need to improve. I still need to contribute in building this nation from within the labour movement. We need an educated labour movement that can engage with business and government constructively.' ★

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