

# "I hate when a simple problem expands out"

Interview with Sidumo Dlamini, Cosatu's new president

**Kally Forrest** talks to the Congress of South African Trade Union's president **Sidumo Dlamini** about his childhood, entry into the union, good and bad moments and his fears, likes and dislikes.



William Matlala

***Where were you born?***

I was born in Swaziland, in a village in a rural area called Hlathishikhulu.

***What is your earliest childhood memory?***

My most vivid memory is when my father died when I was four or five years old and I was taken away from the Dlamini family. My mother was not yet married to my father and doing the customary thing she had to go back home.

After that I was tossed between the two families and later my aunt took me out of Swaziland to South Africa in 1971 when I was about six. In 1973 I went to primary school in Ingwavuma in northern Zululand.

***Who were the important adults in your life?***

There was no one really that I looked up to as a model. As my

father died when I was young he could not be a model for me. My aunt played a key role in raising me and she instilled a strong Christian background. I was involved in church activities like singing, also soccer and martial arts.

***How did you enter the union movement?***

I did not enter unions consciously, I came to it in a strange way. I completed my matric in 1984 and I went to look unsuccessfully for a job on the mines in Carletonville. So I returned to Ingwavuma and a teacher at my old school had recently resigned so they asked me to assist with Standard 10. I am proud to say that I produced many young graduates who still remember me.

I resigned in 1986 as I was sought out as a well brought up exemplary

young person in the area to train in the hospital. I trained as a nurse at Mosvold missionary hospital (now government hospital) for two years and I qualified in 1988.

I moved to Durban and was employed in a hospital in Umlazi. I worked in casualty where I saw many victims of the violence at the time. It was mainly an IFP (Inkatha) hospital. I saw how workers were abused and forced to go out and demonstrate for the IFP.

Then there was a spontaneous strike because we were promised increments by the KwaZulu government and this was not honoured. We moved out the gates without any leadership. It was a two week strike. Nehawu (National Education Health & Allied Workers Union) came and talked to us and I was identified as a leader and shop steward and then I joined Nehawu.

***Where do you live now and why?***

I live in Durban and I have a house in Umlazi. I love township life. I am happy there, I don't want a secluded life in the suburbs. I live in a hotel when I am in Johannesburg and I am here often now so I must find somewhere else to live.

***What are you reading at the moment?***

I read books on economics, at the moment a book by Joseph Stiglitz *Globalisation and its Discontents*. He begins in the 1930s and suggests that capitalism is the problem so we will never have a situation of being out of the woods.

I read moderately as I'm challenged for time. I read on the 'plane and I read lots of Cosatu material. When I was younger I liked Thomas Hardy. I like love stories.

***Who is your favourite singer?***

Benjamin Dube, he's a gospel singer. I like American style music especially Andraé Crouch, also a gospel singer, *Soon and Very Soon*. And jazz, afro jazz. Jimi Smith, deep, deep jazz, guitar and organ. And Don Laka.

***What is your favourite TV programme?***

I watch the news on all channels. I enjoy soaps like *Isidingo* and *Generations*. I don't have much time for TV. But I listen to the radio a lot, current affairs, news, metro classics - I like listening to classical, I'm not into hard rock.

***What public personality irritates you the most?***

I don't really have people who irritate me. Even if I were to make a comment about Helen Zille, I don't hate her. I had some good times with her husband in Australia at an industrial relations conference. I just see her as the opposition.

***What are your favourite clothes?***

Jeans. Unfortunately work sometimes forces me not to wear them. And t-shirts. I don't like suits.

***How do you relax?***

I do exercise, quite a lot. I jog about 30kms in a week. It frees me from stress.

I also relax at home where I have a piano, it ignites my mind with new thoughts. When you play the piano you use all parts of your body - mind, hands, feet. It balances my approach to life. I learnt to play the piano at church but I mainly play jazz piano. I was in a few small bands in the township where I played piano and bass guitar. Some of my friends like Bongani Sokhela are internationally known now. He taught us a few things.

I also play my CDs and DVDs.

***What is your biggest dislike?***

I hate situations where a problem leads to serious tensions and it could be simply solved. Like working in an office where a simple problem expands out, and we can do this also with our country. People complicate situations with their selfish interests so that something cannot be solved.

***What was one of your most frightening moments?***

The political events of 2005 when I was Cosatu provincial chair in KwaZulu-Natal when the deputy president was dismissed by the president. Sitting where I was at the time, I got scared. I could feel the country was shaken.

I am usually a fearless person, I don't fear death but this was a scary, scary thing. We were on the brink of a reversal of our democracy and everything we had achieved up to that point. Thanks there was no war, no bloodshed. We said, "Let's manage this situation with cool heads." People I know were saying things

like, "Why don't we take up arms. We know where we buried our arms." And they meant it.

It was very, very tense in KZN. People began to see this person as a 'Zuma person', that one as an 'Mbeki person'. I had the memory of the early 1990s and all that violence.

***What is one thing that could improve your life?***

Given my age, I am still quite young, my life has been enriched, fulfilled in many ways. But I still need to further my studies. This has been my goal while I do my work so I can contribute more in the public or private sector. It would improve my life to improve other people's lives.

I would like to study public health management which doesn't take me far from my original start in life and also political science.

***What are you most afraid of?***

In the labour movement I have been raised to president of Cosatu, the highest you can go. This is a fulfilment of my life, what more can I want? I only fear failure, and letting people down on what I'm supposed to do. I don't want to attract scandal and fail. I don't like to rush into a decision or pronouncement without careful thinking. I am shy of finding myself in that situation.

***What is your happiest moment in life?***

I love my family although I don't stay much with them because of work. It is a small family: myself, two daughters and a son. I got divorced in 2008. The smallest is 15 years, the daughter, who lives with her mother. It was a very difficult moment in our life as a family, having to work around it.

My life is different when I am together with my children, this is

my most happy moment. I enjoy being with workers also and solving problems with them, but my greatest enjoyment is with my family.

**What is your favourite food?**

Two things. Vegetables, spinach – green vegetables. And cooked meat especially boiled tripe. I can't cook, I'm a terrible cook. When I cook, I cook on my own, not for my family. But I like best *ligusha* a slippery green vegetable which grows in the wild with pap.

**One word to describe your politics.**

Communism. I am a communist. My lifestyle and thinking relates to the thinking of Marx, Lenin. I grew up in the ANC. I want to change the life of the working class.

**What was the saddest moment in your life?**

When I lost my mother. I had no opportunity to see her, I did not know she was sick. She had paid me a visit in Durban and she returned to Swaziland to discuss with the elders coming to stay with me. We came from a poor background but we had managed to buy a house and have it extended and at that moment she passed away.

I never had a chance to pay her back for bringing me into the world. I still feel that pain heavily. I never grew up with her and 30 years down the line I had the opportunity to live with her and it was snatched away.

**What would you do if you won the lotto?**

I would give money to the school I first attended in Ingwavuma for a library. The school is about 78 years old yet it remains the same.

I would also do something for my



neighbours like providing them with a crèche. They always protect my family when I'm away.

**What kind of people would you like your children to become?**

They must not be politicians. My youngest daughter is on that track. Today is not like yesterday where we did not choose to become politicians. I've seen people getting destroyed in politics. Also politics sometimes destroys families and without a family you are nothing.

My children must respect people and they mustn't bully them about me being head of a big organisation. Respect and good values, even to those who are seen as low. They must not boast. They must respect life and the ordinary workers and aunties, fathers that are in the labour movement.

They must also value education, my first one has just completed a degree. Education is key to all.

**Who do you most admire?**

Honestly I find it hard to pick a particular leader. I respect J Zee (Jacob Zuma), Blade Nzimande, Gwede Mantashe. And the life of Chris Hani has influenced me. And Eric Mtshali on the SACP central committee, I admire that man (Mtshali was a unionist in the 1950s, ANC member and regional commander of Umkhonto we Sizwe, and now a councillor in eThekweni).

**What inspires you?**

Challenges. When I have to tackle difficult situations and come to solutions, and at the end of the day we find each other.

I am challenged by working out the role of a Planning Commission as we need to find answers for our country. I'm happy when people criticise Cosatu, especially workers, because it shows that they appreciate the role that Cosatu should play.