

## *'It is enough'*

**I** was born in Springs at a place called Payneville in 1945. The furthest I went with my schooling was, during those times called, form two or three (grade 9 or 10).

### **15 cents an hour**

After school, I went out to find work. My first job was in a textile factory doing stock control. The factory was not unionised and I was earning only 15 cents an hour. Because the factory was not unionised, one couldn't complain or else you would lose your job. At that time I had only one child to feed.

### **TUCSA union**

I started understanding or engaging myself in politics in 1968. The first union I joined was a textile union affiliated under the TUCSA union. It was the only union in this region – the then Transvaal. It was made up of a group of unions that were mainly white. It was like COSATU as a federation is today.

However, after being in this union for sometime I saw that nothing was happening – there was no change. I decided to say no, it is enough. I needed to move and so did other workers who were in the union.

We were approached by another textile union that was affiliated to FOSATU – it was the NUTW, the National Union of Textile Workers. It was then based in Natal.

*Tiny Mabena, a SACTWU  
organiser, speaks to Sarah  
Mosoetsa, Thabo Sephiri and  
William Matlala.*

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We opted for FOSATU because at that time it was powerful – we could see that they were doing things and that there were improvements in workers' salaries and working conditions.

### **Being a woman shopsteward**

I became a shopsteward at work to push the struggle even further. At that time women did not have a major role to play as shopstewards. It was unlike today where we have a say and a major role to play.

I was very lucky, I was in a team of shopstewards which was very co-operative and very strong. To be elected as a shopsteward depended on how well you could speak. Sometimes, when you were in a meeting with workers, they would assess you.

In one meeting, I challenged this woman and took her to task on a number of issues. In the next elections, she actually nominated me to be a shopsteward and encouraged workers to vote for me. She said to them "I want you to elect that woman because I can see she can talk".

From then onwards I said to myself, I was not going to accept issues without questioning them.

## **Siyalala la**

As a shopsteward, I was engaged in a number of strikes for better working conditions and salaries. My first experience of a strike was when we went out on strike for better salaries. At that time there were no procedures to say we must do this or follow that.

We used to have what were called grasshopper strikes or wildcat strikes. When management was not giving in to our demands, we decided that we would not go home - *siyalala la* - we were going to sleep over in the company until our demands were met.

## **The police**

The strike continued. Management saw the seriousness of the strike and requested that we leave the premises during the night. Managers feared that anything was possible because they knew that when workers are fed-up they can do anything. In this strike, like many others, management called the police in to protect themselves and their premises.

Those were the times where policemen were very much against any sort of strike. In those days, we used to work until 'a.m.s' - the mornings - in our respective political organisations or unions. We were operating under difficult circumstances. Other nights, when we were holding meetings (for example COSATU locals) in one of our offices, there would be a siege outside and we would be ordered to disperse.

## **Where is tea tonight?**

In Springs we came up with an approach to deal with this problem of the police and to take the process forward. With the

Chris Dhlaminis and others, we would phone each other during the day in our workplaces. But because phones used to be tapped, we wouldn't say where the meeting would be held tonight, we would say where the tea would be held.

Meetings were called tea parties. We used to hold our meetings at shebeens. We went to shebeens and those who drink would buy drinks and we would continue with our business.

The police would get so surprised to see things continuing since they thought they were monitoring the situation and were making sure that no meetings were taking place. Things were moving. At that time people were very committed.

## **As SACTWU's organiser**

I am presently an organiser at SACTWU and am involved in membership recruitment, workplace negotiations and national negotiations. I have sat in many wage negotiations.

The new LRA has definitely changed conditions of work and has given workers the rights they deserve. However, some clauses in the LRA are questionable, like the clause on workplace forums. I know that workers couldn't have agreed to it because it takes us back to the old works committees. In the works committees, management simply dictated and workers simply attended the meetings and were expected to agree to what management had already decided. The failure of these works committees resulted in the formation of many unions. There are some things that we won during the negotiations of the LRA, but we lost some to business. The LRA was therefore a compromise between us, as labour and business.

## **Leaders leaving labour**

In terms of my future with SACTWU and



the years I have been with the organisation, I think one needs to say now, this is enough. I am therefore thinking of retiring and letting young ones continue the hard work. In terms of SACTWU's own future, I think the union is faced with many challenges. There is this movement of our leaders to government or business, there is the reduction of tariffs and there are major job losses in the industry.

I think that the movement of labour leaders to government, like Mbhazima Shilowa – now premier of Gauteng, might help strengthen labour, provided they do not abandon us and all labour values, for business or government. Faced by this challenge, I think it is for us as labour to go back to our drawing boards, work hard and find new capable leaders.

### **Demonstrations**

The biggest challenge facing us now is job loss. The government is also not helping the situation by reducing tariffs. As SACTWU, we will continue demonstrating on this and making sure that workers do not lose their jobs, especially with the introduction of new technology into workplaces.

### **Investment company**

Other than these challenges facing our organisation, there are also positive things like an investment company and the possibility of a merger.

While many argue that their investment



companies are not working, our investment company is working really well. While it was thought that the money generated by the investment company would be used to improve the salaries of officials, it is in fact being used for the benefit of workers.

Workers are getting their money back. We have funeral covers that cover everyone in the family including still-born babies. The workers also receive bursaries for their children who want to further their studies.

These investment companies also assist workers in buying their own homes. With the little money that they are earning, they cannot afford to buy houses for their families, therefore investment companies help a great deal.

SACTWU is looking at merging in the future. At the moment we are going to enter into discussions with FAWU, SACCAWU and other independent unions, and we hope something will come out of that. ★