

'It is tough being a woman organiser in the unions'

I was born in Pietersburg in a small village called Ga-Maphoto. At the age of eight I went to live with my aunt in Durban. She wanted to relieve my father's burden because we were eight children at home. I stayed with her until standard eight. I had a good up-bringing there and enjoyed school. If I had money now I would go back to school full time.

My father died in 1972 so I went back home. I finished my matric in Duiwelskloof near Tzaneen in 1977 after having to learn to write, speak and read Northern Sotho all over again.

1976 uprisings

My involvement in politics started with the 1976 uprisings. I was a leader of the Student Christian Movement. The school was far away from Johannesburg but we had a way of contacting our fellow students there. We also took part in the activities of June 1976 and some of us ended up in jail.

Things were never the same at school after June 1976. Although we knew about Mandela and Sobukwe, we were scared of talking about them openly. We used to go to the University of the North in Pietersburg for 'mogabolo' (political discussions).

Working

I fell pregnant in 1977 while doing matric and had a girl. In 1979 I did secretarial

Maggie Pooe, TGWU's co-ordinator of social benefits, speaks to Etienne Vlok and William Matlala.

courses in Johannesburg but could not secure a job because I did not have a permit to work there. This made me aware of the injustices of the pass laws.

I then got a job at Old Mutual in Louis Trichardt as a secretary. I lived with my aunt and nine family members in a two-roomed house. I did not have a permit to be in the area and was harassed by the municipality police every day. I thought of resigning and going back home but I had to support my mother, daughter and siblings.

I got married in 1982 to a man whom I met while studying in Johannesburg. My husband worked at Sasol III in Secunda so I resigned from Old Mutual to join my husband there.

I started working for Old Mutual in 1984, where my superiors expected to be called 'meneer'. I could not stand doing this. I was constantly harassed and intimidated so I resigned after only three months in the company.

In 1986 I had a son. Thereafter I got a job at the then Highveld Board at the local



When I joined NUMSA the owner did not allow me and he refused to pay me two months salary. After settling with the help of the union, I resigned because my relationship with the company had turned sour.

Organising for TGWU

I realised that I was losing all my jobs because of my association with COSATU so I decided to go and work for the unions. I applied to TGWU and was appointed as an office administrator in Secunda in 1991.

People who taught me the ropes in COSATU were comrade JJ Mabena, who is now an MEC in Mpumalanga, and comrade Susan Shabangu, who is now a deputy minister.

municipality. Because of unfair labour practices there I organised my fellow workers to join the municipality union, which was TGWU then. But I was expelled from the municipality. I then worked for a local doctor who also did not treat his employees well. We joined NEHAWU but once again I was seen as the villain and was dismissed.

A year after I joined the unions I became an organiser. I had a great urge to assist dismissed workers. I won my first case and was so happy I could not sleep. I said that if men can do it, I can too. It was just a case of listening and saying what I was taught.

I was an organiser in Secunda until 1995. I negotiated wages and benefits. I

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then moved to Johannesburg where I negotiated the provident fund. I got involved in negotiating social benefits such as

By that time I had major differences with my husband and it led to divorce. In 1990 I started work at a local garage as a manager.

medical aid and provident fund for Gauteng.

Security is the toughest sector to organise in TGWU. Most of the employers

are ex-policemen. They will not listen to you because you are a woman. It is tough being a woman organiser in the unions. Yet sometimes you can use your motherly instincts when the men are angry.

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You can cool them down and get them to talk. The sector has many small companies who are not scared, like big companies, of being exposed. They can just close down and open a new company.

Gender and the unions

In the union women were scared of raising their hands or talking in front of men. When I stood up the men would order me to sit down. I represent these men at companies but they tell me to sit down just because I am a woman. Just because I am a woman they dispute what I say but when a man says the same thing they say it is a fact. I got involved in gender issues with Susan Shabangu. I learnt a lot from her. I co-ordinated gender issues at my branch until 1995 while at the same time co-ordinating gender for the Wits region. I also represented COSATU on a Felicia show on sexual harassment and participated in workshops and plays run by the Sexual Harassment Education Project.

Although trade unions have preached the gospel of gender equality for some time, I do not think that they are taking it seriously. The very thing that unions are preaching in companies, like quotas, they do not practice. Quotas are the only way that you will force unions to take gender seriously. When we argue about the quota system, our male comrades will always emphasise the issue of training, as if there

is a special school that they themselves have attended to qualify as unionists.

Challenges

Subcontracting is a problem because we are losing membership. But often when companies subcontract we just change the union. For instance, when a company subcontracts their in-house cleaners to get rid of a certain union, the workers just join TGWU. That is why I say to the employers that COSATU is so wide you cannot run from it.

An area of great concern that COSATU should discuss is when companies give trucks to drivers to own (driver-owner schemes). These drivers will then lose all the benefits they were getting from the company. The driver, maybe an ex-shopsteward, will then employ some people. I asked one such driver: How can you do this? How much are you paying the people? Often it is peanuts. This scheme is also a problem because both the truck driver and the company claim not to be the employer.

I said if men can do it, I can do it too.

My personal view is that there is a conflict of interest when a shopsteward is also a director of a company. You have to say I am a worker and I believe in this or I am an employer and I believe in that. I fail to understand how you can represent employers at the same time that you represent workers.

SATAWU

The SATAWU (ex-SARHWU) and TGWU merger is long overdue. I am happy that it is taking place because the membership will grow and we will be stronger when we strike! ★