

Jabu Gwala

SACTWU organiser

How it all started

I was born in 1951 in the Pietermaritzburg area, next to Howick. I was one of seven children. My father worked for Sarmcol in the boiling department, as a labourer. In 1965, he was dismissed from Sarmcol. He had missed work for about three days, attending to a family problem and when he went back to the factory, he was dismissed, after 15 years service. He suggested I leave school and go and look for a job, so I did and I started to work in 1967.

Pietermaritzburg has very few industrial areas and very few jobs, so I went to Pinetown looking for a job. I was employed by Frame Textiles in 1967, and worked there till 1980.

In 1969, we had a strike in my department of the factory, which employed about 1 500. The strike was about the bonus system and attendance deductions, whereby a whole rand was deducted if you were late for just one minute.

The union is formed

We had another strike in early 1973, which led to the formation of the union in September. When it was formed, I became involved as just an ordinary worker. Then in 1974, we had another big strike which led to Halton Cheadle - one of the students involved in labour matters then - being banned. That is when I started to take a leading role in the union. When the strike was on, management requested a couple of people to come and discuss. Most people were reluctant not knowing what the employer was going to do. There was a liaison committee, but it was very new and blamed by workers for collaborating with employers, and not being concerned

with worker's grievances. I was not on the liaison committee at that time. So I took the initiative with a couple of guys to go into the factory and to negotiate.

When the strike was over, some people were dismissed, but fortunately I wasn't. People started to follow me and push me to be elected to the liaison committee. We decided to make it our strategy to infiltrate the liaison committee and to use it to the advantage of workers. So in 1974, after the strike, the company called an election and I was elected to the liaison committee and I served on it from 1974 to 1980. In 1974, I was also elected to the underground shopsteward committee, which was meeting in the office, planning outside of the impimpis who were serving on the liaison committee. From there I was elected a chairman of the branch and the treasurer of TUACC.

That was when I began to understand politics, recognising the rights of workers to be represented by a proper trade union. In 1980 we had a big strike resulting in myself and another two comrades being detained. One of my colleagues was assassinated after the strike.

So I was dismissed in 1980 - I was not lucky any more! I got a job at Romatex and worked there for nine months. Then I was appointed as an organiser in 1982, and organised 18 000 workers in Hammarsdale, Pinetown and Ladysmith. Then I was transferred to the Eastern Cape. When I got here we had no recognition at all, other than in Port Elizabeth, where there were about 4 000 members. So we organised and started to employ people in the union and today we are approaching 30 000 members.

PROFILE

I was involved in the formation of FOSATU and I was regional treasurer for FOSATU in 1979. I also took part in the formation of COSATU.

Hard worker

I think I'm a hard worker. I don't have time limits. I work any time which is available to me - which has led to me losing my wife. I was married with two children. The children are with my sister, and my wife has run away. I would love to be married again, and to have a more organised life now, instead of burning myself out. I'm approaching forty, I don't have a house, I don't have a family, I don't see my kids - they are just growing up without me. When you reach forty you start thinking about such things.

Family influences

My father was a member of SACTU at Sarmcol in the 1960s. He came home once and told my mother to take any paper that anything to do with the union or the movement, and burn it because the police were arresting anybody who has got that interest. People used to talk very softly, they were so scared.

One of the things that motivated me was the kind of impression my parents had regarding the white people. I thought rather than hating or being scared of the white people, you have to have got prove that a human being is a human being. So that was my first approach in the trade union field and the second approach is to whether we can't end this kind of terrible system.

Searching for a system

The thing I enjoy most is to win rights for the workers, to win a strike, to prove that workers have power, and to win benefits, to improve people's standard of living. The most important thing to me, is that workers should not suffer for ever. We should have an ending point whereby no workers would be suffering. If we must suffer, let's all suffer, not just workers. So I've been searching for a system which will allow that.

At the moment, we are looking at co-operatives and we've got the workers' charter campaign. This is reviving my spirit after the problems in Eastern Europe - you know it deteriorates the spirit of everyone who thought that they had the best system. But the workers' charter approach such as demanding that workers should be represented on the board of directors

etc, I think is the area which one has to explore. We must find how workers can really control their own lives rather than to rely on someone else, because he has been appointed as a director.

I think if we expect real change in the system soon, not just in getting rid of apartheid, I think we'll be disappointed. It's going to take time. The level of education is not up standard. We are at a stage when black people will be in parliament. So we have to assess what parliament can and cannot do for us as the working class. I wouldn't like us to aim very high at this moment. The changes won't be to the system yet. The capitalists are still strong, and politically the working class is still not clear.

Building the confidence of the masses

I see the role of workers as getting rid of apartheid and then going further. That is why I prefer the independence of the unions, building the consciousness of the workers. We managed to build up consciousness against the employers by creating trade unions. Now we have to build the consciousness of the workers, of the working class, to lead. But I don't think we are very near to that. In a real sense, when we speak of the leadership of the working class, we are talking about the intellectuals in the trade unions. The experience of intellectuals should not decide for the masses. We have to come up with the masses rather than be there for the masses.

Let's take the campaign that has been conducted by SACTWU. We started a campaign that shopstewards should go and negotiate for an exclusive notice board in the factories to be used for the workers' charter campaign. They negotiated that and they came back very proud that they have that board. They are now holding their discussions about what we want in a new South Africa.

That is the kind of leadership I mean, building up the confidence of people so that they can do things themselves. That is the level we should go for to get serious changes. If we give confidence to the people on the shop-floor and the working class at large, I think that will be the right stage at which to expect changes will be understood by the people.

A long battle for socialism

You experience a lot of things in the trade union. Say workers win a big lump sum. You say: 'Comrades, why don't you start a co-op and buy

kombis and we'll know that the kombi belongs to our comrades, rather than allowing SABTA with their capitalist interests to give us transport.' But they say: 'No ways, I want my money. I'll decide what to do with it.' You can see, even if you talk about socialism, it's not right down to the grassroots, people don't really understand what it means. But you'll find those people wearing t-shirts with all kinds of logos. We've got a lot of work to do to get people to understand. Otherwise we'll introduce socialism in the country, and then we'll have a revolt against it like in Eastern Europe.

Alliances mean having differences

I was involved in civic organisation in Clermont, and I support the mobilisation of all the people. But there must also be a difference between the unions and political organisations. For example, we as COSATU have an alliance with political organisations. But how can you call it an alliance any more if worker leaders are also leaders on political organisations?

Alliances between two organisations means meeting together discussing a common purpose. But if you can't see the difference between the organisations it's a problem. I think it's forcing each not to clash with the other, whereas it is helpful to have some disagreement. You can be a member of a political organisation - it would be wrong to refuse people to be members - but to be on the executive is not necessary. That will break down the independence of the unions.

Bear in mind also that political organisations have the advantage of having educated people, and more political understanding than workers, and you end up having the decisions coming from one side all the time. What I am suggesting is other constituencies should have proper discussion on their own as well, and then to have an alliance in the true sense of the word.

No government should dictate to workers

I don't think the ANC is against trade unions. But at the same time they will, like any government, have things against the trade unions, and they may take some actions which will not be seen as a good decision by the workers. I think you cannot avoid that.

For example, I don't think that the new government should have anything to do with wages. I don't think anyone should dictate between the employer and employee. The



government has been helping employers all these years, but just because workers are organised now, for the government to dictate for the workers is wrong. They've left the employers to do whatever they want to us for all these years and now it's our chance to fight back. Seriously, it will limit the chances of changing the system if the government tries to improve the economy at the expense of the workers.

The moment the government comes, for example, with a minimum wage, no-one will be able to get more than the minimum wage. Employers will insist on the minimum wage, and from that, worker power will be demolished. There will be no more worker power and so what will the trade union be for - nothing. And what will we be striking for - nothing. I feel the fair fight between employer and employees is a good education for people to understand how bad the capitalist system is.

Unfortunately in South Africa, we have always had more white capitalists. It looks as if the capitalist is only white. In a new South Africa, I hope blacks will have businesses and people will see that it is not the colour which oppresses them, it is the system. So in the process of fighting the system, they will gain the confidence and understanding of what is wrong with the system. ☆