

# *Jerry Mphahlele: CEPPWAWU ex-shopsteward at Fedgas*

**I** was born in 1947 at Mphahlele Village in the Northern Province. My father worked in the asbestos mines there. When my sister and I passed standard six I had to leave school because my father could not pay for both of us.

## **Earning R9 a week**

In 1969 I started work at Raymond Plywood in Alrode where I made doors. In 1971 I asked for an increase. The boss refused. Later I messed up a door with the sandpaper machine. The boss shouted at me because I had the cheek to ask for an increase and now I messed up the door. He called me to his office. I thought he was going to fire me but he offered me a R1 increase. After the increase I earned R9 a week.

At the time I was staying in a hostel in Tokoza. In the evenings I collected clothes for dry-cleaning. I made more money doing this than at the factory so I quit my job. I was worried that the authorities would give me 72 hours to leave Tokoza because of the pass laws. So I got another ID from home affairs. With these two IDs I got around the pass laws.

## **Working at Fedgas**

At the time my brother was working at Fedgas. He organised a job for me in June 1971. I have been at Fedgas ever since. The German owners trained me on the different machines. I now analyse mixtures

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for the mines and hospitals in the speciality gasses laboratory. It is dangerous to work here. A while ago one worker died when a cylinder burst.

In 1975 I got married to a woman from my village. We have two girls: one studied librarian science and the other is doing business management at college. I am very proud of them. When I asked management to help me pay their fees they answered that Fedgas is not a financial institution. In the end they offered me a loan of R1 000, but it costs more than R8 000 a year for studies.

## **Joining the union**

When I joined CWIU in 1982 it was affiliated to FOSATU. We struggled for recognition until late 1983. The drivers first heard about CWIU and brought forms for us to join. An organiser came to tell us about the union.

Management would not allow us to meet at the company so we organised a meeting at Morena Stores. We did not realise that it would be like a war organising the union. There were no stop orders then, so the interim shopstewards collected the 50c per month subs by hand.



the late Sam Ntuli was still alive, MAWU, CWIU, TGWU and PPWAWU shared an office where we had our meetings. I put up information from those meetings on our canteen notice board.

### **30c a week increase**

The workers were very militant around that time. When we had a dispute they made fires at the gate and stopped people from entering the factory. Our salaries then started at R9 a week. The supervisors would decide who got increases and how much. If you spoke too much you would get a very small increase. After Fedgas recognised the union, we got a 30c across the board

After we signed the recognition agreement I was elected as chairperson of the shopstewards. Workers chose me because I could read, write, take minutes and communicate with management.

Our HR manager, Mr de Villiers, encouraged us to join the union. He even gave union forms to new workers. He said without the union he could not do anything. He was later dismissed. We do not know why.

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Joining the union improved things for us. We learnt about political and social issues and pension funds. In 1983 when

increase after our first negotiations and a 55c increase after our second negotiations.

When COSATU was formed there was big trouble. One hundred per cent of the workforce participated in the first stay-away when Moses Mayekiso was arrested. The slogan of the stay-away was 'release our leaders'. For the first time we came to understand politics.

### **Everyone a shopsteward**

When our leaders were released in 1990 everyone wanted to be a shopsteward. They said that I did not have matric and could not speak proper English. I said it is easy to talk now that everybody can talk. The workers elected other shopstewards but they did not last six months. Management turned their minds quickly. They never reported back. They only spoke to management. After those guys

were kicked out I was elected again until 1998

After this we marched for centralised bargaining so management accused me of always keeping the workers away from the factory Management proposed that only half the workers march and the other half work. The workers agreed but management would have to pay everyone. We said that our comrades will work for us too. Management refused.

### **CWIU-PPWAWU merger**

At one of our congresses our German guest spoke about mergers. He said that sometimes when you fix this, you lose that. You cannot win all the time. Employers over the world are coming together. Workers must also. So I think the merger is good.

When I was moved to the speciality gasses laboratory, management claimed that I was staff now. They told me to take leave when I attend marches or meetings I did not. When it was time for increases I did not get what the union demanded. Management claimed that I was outside the bargaining unit so my increase was determined by management. I asked how they determined that figure. They have still not given me an answer. The union is fighting for us all to be covered.

### **Respecting the workers**

This company is getting worse all the time. The union and the Department of Labour must appoint inspectors to check each factory. Nobody wants to strike but management pushes the workers. The top management do not want to communicate. They never walk through the factory greeting the workers. The managers do not respect the workers. When the workers leave in the afternoon they are tired. Management does not work. They know everything but they do not produce.

Since 1994 I have seen many changes but not in all parts of the country. This government cannot correct all the mistakes in five years. We might not even be satisfied after the coming five years. People complain on TV that they do not have jobs but under the previous government it was the same.

### **The struggle is not over**

In my rural area people do not attend meetings so they do not understand the issues. When the leaders come to report back on the difficulties that they have, people do not attend. It is also a problem in Tokoza when politicians call meetings.

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*'When COSATU was formed... we came to understand politics.'*

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It is the same when you are a shopsteward. When you report back few workers attend. But they call the shopsteward when they are in trouble. Workers do not understand the LRA and when you try and teach them they do not listen.

Worker attendance has decreased because they are not cross anymore. They think that the struggle is finished and that things will just come to them. But that is not the case. People must continue as before. We can revive attendance if the top leadership come to the shopfloor or rural area to motivate people. They do not want to see the same old faces.

### **Reviving the alliance**

We must revive the alliance. The alliance must start on the floor and in the locals, not just be at the top. The ANC branch in Kathlehong must tackle social issues with the COSATU branch there. Maybe then we can achieve something ★