

Learning more about Fedusa general secretary, Dennis George

The Federation of Democratic Trade Unions of South Africa (Fedusa) is South Africa's second largest federation with 410 000 members. **Kally Forrest** spoke to its general secretary, Dennis George, about his background, likes and dislikes and what inspires him.



Where were you born?

I was born in Cape Town in 1958 at The Akkers, which later became a white area called Goodwood. We were then forced to move to Ravensmead.

Which adults were your main role models?

My parents. My father was a leatherworker, a clicker who cuts out the patterns for the machinist to sew. He was a shop steward in his workplace and belonged to the National Leather and Allied Workers Union (NULAW), a union that was formed in 1936.

My mother was a machinist in the same factory, Herzberg Milner between Parow and Elsies River. That's where they met.

My parents were strong role models for me. I was the third eldest of 11 children. My brother born before me, died.

What schooling did you have?

I went to Ravensmead for primary school and then to Elswood High in Elsies River where I could easily walk from home. I didn't reach matric as I had to leave in standard 7 (grade 9) to go to work.

I went to work in a textile factory called Meritex, which is now closed, as a knitter. It was there that I joined the Garment Workers Union. There were three shifts which were alternated. Later I worked at Puma and then I decided to do voluntary missionary work. I travelled around with the church for two years all round the Western Cape and South West Africa (Namibia).

When I was 25 I went as a part-time student to Cape Town College where I finished my matric.

How did you become a union official?

I worked for Sanlam for five years and it was there that the union approached me – the Transport and Allied Trade Union where I worked as an organiser for five years. I used to bargain and represent the union at the Transnet Bargaining Council. I would fly up to J'burg every Monday. Transnet was divided into airways, Spoornet and Metro Rail and it was Metro Rail workers that I bargained for.

There was a split in the union and the one section became the SA Transnet Workers Union, Satawu (not the same Satawu that is

affiliated to Cosatu). We had a struggle to get Transnet to recognise this new union so we staged a three day strike to force recognition.

Later Satawu merged into the Technical Workers Union and even later we merged with the Voetplaats union to become Utatu (United Transport and Allied Trade Union) with about 14 000 members. I started to get involved in federation issues and over time became the assistant general secretary of Fedusa. When Chez [Mlani], the then general secretary, left I became the general secretary.

Where do you live now?

I live in a house in Greenside [Johannesburg]. When I moved from Cape Town to J'burg we lived in a flat in Braamfontein and below in the same building were the union offices. It took me five minutes to get to work! At some point Chez persuaded me to buy a property in Pretoria as an investment for R12 000. We built a house on it and lived there for two years and then prices shot through the roof. So I sold it and bought this property in Greenside.



What do you read?

I read numerous policy documents at work. At home I mainly read the Bible. It's next to my bed. I don't really read newspapers as I don't believe half the stuff that's written in them. I'm quite involved in Bible Studies at the Rhema Church in Randburg which has about 8000 members.

What are your favourite TV programmes?

I like watching sports and documentaries like national geographic and also the history channel on DSTV.

What do you do in your free time?

I play golf every Saturday morning at the Randpark Golf Club. Then over weekends we maybe go to the botanical gardens or visit the Magaliesberg or see friends and have a braai.

What is your favourite music?

I like jazz. Jonathan Butler is a favourite. When I'm in Cape Town I go to the Galaxy Club with friends. In the old days we used to listen to jazz on Sunday afternoons where groups like the *Pacific Express*, which Jonathan Butler belonged to, used to play.

Which public figure irritates you the most?

Tony Leon really irritates me. People must try to be human beings and not put up a big facade. When he

resigned he had to make a big fuss and go and have tea with Mbeki and promote himself rather than talking about his party and what it had achieved and its new leadership.

What are your favourite clothes?

Short pants. I don't like to be too formal. I'm causal at work, I like to be informal.

What was one of your most frightening moments?

I was once mugged near my home when I was about 20 years old. It was dangerous where I lived, there were a lot of gangsters and they would catch you especially in the evening. Just like it is now. About seven or eight people robbed me of my clothes, shoes, watch, cigarettes, money. The youngest gangster said "can I give him a stab shot" to impress the others. I took evasive action and ran for my life.

What is your biggest dislike?

Pretence in political or everyday life. Not being sincere. I avoid such people.

What is one thing you'd like to improve in your life?

I'd like to finish my education, my university degree. I studied part time at Unisa [University of South Africa – a correspondence college] for a B Proc which was not easy and I never finished. I completed eight law subjects in my second year. It was not a helpful environment and

exams were mainly multiple choice so they don't have to mark too much. You can't study like that so I dropped out.

I think if I had a degree it would give me self confidence. I suppose if I had got a degree earlier I would have become a professional and not come into the union. I qualified as a commissioner through the CCMA via the Services Seto. I encourage people in Fedusa to also study and get qualifications and I'm accused of causing them to leave to get jobs elsewhere once they have qualified. But people have to get opportunities in life.

I have applied to do an MA at GLU [Global Labour University] at Wits [University of the Witwatersrand] next year. I am interested in deepening my understanding of macroeconomics.

What was your happiest moment?

When my children were born. It is such a complex process to be born. I have three children. A daughter of 23 years from my first marriage. She works at Transnet and is a member of Utatu. She works as a train driver assistant for Spoornet on the Cape Town to Worcester line. She complains of doing a lot of overtime. My one son is studying engineering and I have another son of three years old – the apple of his parents' eye.

Describe your politics briefly

As a Fedusa general secretary I don't take a public position because we are supposed to be independent of any political parties, but personally I vote for the ANC [African National Congress]. I would describe myself as a social democrat.

What was one of the saddest moments in your life?

When my mother passed away two

years ago. She was 73 years old and very strong, but she suffered from asthma all her life. But all those years she headed the household. She took my father's salary and she ran everything. She didn't have high education, but she knew how to raise her kids and deal with money. She disciplined us mainly verbally although they occasionally used corporal punishment when we were young, using a belt.

My father went to live with my sister so the family centre has broken down. I feel very sad about this.

How would you like your children to grow up?

My children must care for the community and mustn't destroy the environment. They must have respect, human decency and stand up for people who can't stand up for themselves. They must not look to enrich themselves. Money isn't everything. My wife has a small business that is doing well, I am happy with what I have.

Who do you most admire?

Trevor Manuel. He was a member of the working class, there are not many working class leaders to look up to any more. He's kept to his values – I don't always agree with him but he is consistent.

Mandela is obviously an icon but I have recently found more and more synergy with President Thabo Mbeki. I find him sharp and willing to directly engage. I first met him at the height of the HIV/AIDS debate and then he said let the Minister of Health deal with this and he became more receptive to other views. I think he is trying to reach out with the imbizos.

What inspires you?

Unemployment and poverty drives me. What can we do? It's a national challenge. We need to analyse such

things as which province is worst hit. Is it the same everywhere? At Fedusa you will see in our documents our employment growth strategies. It speaks of how to deal with wealth distribution and social protection. I'd like to say one day that we inherited so many problems from the apartheid government, but this is what we achieved.

It is important to improve and change people's lives. In Fedusa we train people so they become more employable. I think vocational training is important, it is my passion. We need more artisans so I serve on Jpsa [Joint Initiative for Priority Skills Acquisition] which is chaired by the deputy president. We look at where there is a critical scarcity of skills, for example artisans. Then we work out how to fast track the production of artisans. We try to find people who are working in the area but need to

how to help such people.

I also sit on the National Skills Authority which advises the Minister of Labour on the Setas and so on.

I chair the National Board for Further Education and Training (FET). There are 50 FET colleges across the country. In the old days they offered N1, N2, N3 courses. So for example a worker was employed by the railways and then he would get time off to take courses at the tech. Now we are revising this system and we advise the Minister of Education on curriculum matters so that we match the training required by the labour market. So, for example, if a person wants to work in tourism they can do a national diploma in tourism, it's called a National Certificate Vocational, and an internship in a company.

If by 2014 we could reduce unemployment through such



Fedusa's Research, Education and Development coordinator, Krister van Rensburg talks to Dennis George in their Roodepoort offices

Kally Forrest