

Man of the union

Samwu's Petrus Mashishi

William Matlala



For most of his working life **Petrus Mashishi** has been organising municipal workers. He is the South African Municipal Workers Union's (Samwu) longest serving shop steward and was its president for 20 years. **Kally Forrest** interviews him about his rich and active history in the union movement

How did you come into the labour movement?

In 1977 I worked as an artisan in the City of Johannesburg and the council took a decision that 'Bantu' (African) artisans could only work in the rural areas. Management did not necessarily support this but white artisans in the Johannesburg Combined Municipal Workers and the Municipal Employers Association pushed for it as they did not want black workers to undercut them. Before this we had been working without problems in the city; we were even trained by the municipality.

I heard of the Industrial Aid Society (IAS) and I went to get help and this was the beginning of my involvement in the labour

movement. A media campaign followed, supported by organisations like the South African Council of Churches and the Black Sash which exposed the racism in the municipality.

In response the City transferred us to the Johannesburg water branch and called us water mechanics which was really artisans in disguise.

The IAS was affiliated to Tuacc (Trade Union Advisory and Coordinating Council) which had a local government project linked to the organisation of Putco bus workers. This led to the launch of the Transport & General Workers Union (T&G) in 1975 which consisted of Putco, Durban dockworkers, Richards Bay Coal Terminal and us.

We worked closely with other new unions. There was no demarcation and officials and legal volunteers worked for everyone - people like David and Debbie Dison, Lydia Kompe, Aaron Tlabejane and Bernie Fanaroff. We worked out of Sacta House in Bree Street.

We held regular meetings and every Wednesday we had an education session with people like Phil Bonner from the university. We learnt about what is a trade union, the workers' struggle, workers' control, how to read a payslip, discipline procedures, and economics. Later we attended courses at Wits University.

This was all very interesting and we saw it as part of the struggle against apartheid.



Mashishi angrily responding to Cosatu Congress' allegations that municipal strikers had behaved irresponsibly by overturning rubbish bins on the city's roads and pavements.

We were allowed to form works committees and at the City Council this was a front for T&G whose constitution we used. Later representatives became shop stewards.

Were you involved in any strike action at that time?

We got involved in the 1980 strike that Joe Mavi's union, the Black Municipal Workers Union (BMWU), called. In the Council there was also a liaison committee which split. One part became BMWU and the other an employer's union which was registered in two weeks.

The BMWU demanded R58 per week in the tradition of Sactwu's (South African Congress of Trade Unions) living wage campaign. I was earning about R28 per week (I earned R8.50 when I started as an artisan at the council in 1972 and we got a 20c annual bonus!). The strike lasted for about two weeks. Martin Sere, later an advisor to OR (Oliver Tambo) and Samwu's (South African Municipal Workers Union) first general secretary, later joked that the union had not even had a meeting with workers before the strike.

Workers heard about the demand in the municipal hostels where they lived packed together. They declared

Malebelinye izwi labasebenzi (let the voice of workers be one).

Although I was in T&G we all joined the strike. We assembled every day at the Selby Hostel. The army and police surrounded the hostels and some workers were killed in the strike.

Then the army brought in buses and forced strikers onto them and they were dumped in the rural areas, not even where they came from.

Mavi's union was formed about two weeks before the strike and only lasted for about six months after. It had no bargaining structures. All the strikers were dismissed and T&G negotiated for their reinstatement. The leadership of BMWU like Martin Sere, Thami Mazwi and Philip Dlamini then went into exile and Mavi died in a car accident soon after.

What happened after the strike was smashed?

The strike greatly boosted T&G and we recruited a huge amount of 3 500 workers. Membership only went up again significantly when we launched Samwu.

Before the strike T&G had recruited workers in the water department in the Avalon depot (Soweto). But T&G had not been permitted to register (under the

Industrial Conciliation Act) because we had African members. This made it difficult to bargain. We only finally got registered in 1984 with the passing of the Wiehahn laws.

Although we weren't registered the Council's mostly white HR department was sympathetic. They knew that they were really talking to the union on the works committee. So we negotiated for salary increases for Avalon workers and we later recruited workers from the Johannesburg parks department and other sections.

In Springs the municipality was organised by Putco workers, especially Vivian Zungu (later president of T&G). Secunda municipality followed, then KZN (KwaZulu-Natal) and the Pietermaritzburg electricity departments.

I have been a shop steward since we organised Avalon, until today. I have never missed a term and I will be until I go on pension next year. I am the longest serving office bearer and shop steward in Samwu. In fact Cosatu (Congress of South African Trade Unions) gave me an award as one of the longest serving Cosatu office bearers.

What role did you play in Samwu's formation?

I was part of the negotiating team to form Samwu but I never knew that people were assessing me for president. Jane Barrett and Mops (John Mawbey) were also there as well as Spambo (Joseph Molo), originally from Lesotho but working in KZN.

There were a lot of difficulties in coming together. The biggest union membership was in T&G and the Cape Town Municipal Workers Association headed by John Ernstzen, they were bigger than all of us. We had to call in Dullah Omar who was an office bearer in the UDF (United Democratic Front) and Cosatu office bearer Sydney Mufamadi. There were mainly problems with the UDF unions like Sabmawu (South African Black

Municipal Workers Union), the SA Municipal Workers Union, South African Allied Workers Union and the General Workers Union of South Africa

These problems included that the UDF unions had no income. Often there was no record of membership and no union structures in existence. No record of assets or of organisers. The unity talks adopted the policy of one organiser per thousand members but often the UDF unions used volunteers and they all wanted to come into the merged union.

The UDF unions considered company check-off facilities a sell out. For them we were in bed with employers because they deducted membership dues for us. This was a big political issue.

But we all worked together and eventually launched Samwu in 1987. After the launch other municipal unions came in like Dimes (Durban Indian Municipal Employees Society), the Johannesburg Municipal Workers Union and others. There were many mergers later.

How did you feel about being Samwu's first president?

I had some leadership experience as I was chair of the Johannesburg branch and I attended the merger talks, but this was different. It was in the context of a new union and I had never run a national union before. The greatest help was the leadership team - there were two office bearers from T&G and two from the Cape Town union.

There was honesty and trust between us and we became strong friends. In those days you didn't stay in hotels when you travelled, you stayed at people's houses. We slept at my place in Jo'burg, or at Sephams or Mops' house in Durban, in Cape Town at John's house. We were like a family. It was better than staying at a hotel because we really bonded.

There was little money in the new union so we sacrificed a lot. We all shared the same vision which made us succeed. We travelled a lot to

merge the different parts of the union and to recruit. At every meeting we had a membership report.

The NEC (National Executive Committee) was a committed team. We slept in a church dormitory in stack beds, both men and women. There were no complaints, no sexual harassment, unlike now when people are staying in separate rooms in a hotel. There was disciplined commitment to organising, honest reporting and team work.

What defines your politics?

I am a unionist and a member of the community and part of the working class. I believe we must unite to fight our struggle which must go beyond the workplace. Our congress resolutions in Samwu have many times reaffirmed our relationship with the community and some provinces have taken this very seriously. In politics there must be broader structures not just limited to labour.

The APF (Anti-Privatisation Forum) was formed by Samwu. It was a product of Cosatu even though people have this attitude to it. It was formed in our campaign against Egoli 2002 privatisation plans. We assembled a number of organisations into a forum. Our weakness though was that we let others run it.

It was a different culture in Samwu. In T&G there was more sacrifice. We all used to chip in for lunch at meetings. Now lunch and comfortable travel is paid for. Perhaps this was created by having stop order facilities. People complain about their accommodation. We sacrificed our time for meetings, now because we have negotiated time off people won't give up their time anymore. The more they get, the more they demand.

The culture of sacrifice has gone. The Cape union brought in this different culture. It had money and it was the biggest and it influenced the culture of other unions but Dimes was the worst, it was just luxury.

Looking back what did you achieve?

When we started there was no pension fund, no conditions of service, no disciplinary or grievance procedures - you could be dismissed without a hearing. We had 12 days leave and low salaries.

Now we get double that leave, and a provident fund on top of a pension. We have all organisational rights, full-time shop stewards, five days a year shop stewards training and we can combine the shop stewards' days if we want a longer training. Full-time stewards have offices, vehicles, computers and unlimited time for union work and no one asks what they are doing.

With such benefits everyone wants to be a shop steward and disputes arise in elections. With so many benefits some people abuse this.

Also with centralised bargaining not all workers feel part of negotiations. There are local labour forums but these bargain limited issues and people rely on the national and don't take up issues on a local level.

What was your greatest achievement?

Moving in 1989 from 12 000 members to 30 000 in Samwu. We were the fastest growing union in the country. Also getting the many employers and unions into a centralised bargaining council.

Then the formation of Salga (South African Local Government Association). We persuaded negotiators that we needed an employer organisation in the constitution - one employer body for the purposes of bargaining. Before 1994 bargaining was fragmented, expensive and the union was overstretched. Every province had its own council, every union its own negotiations. We managed to get Salga formed for bargaining at the council. Salga has no idea what role we played in their formation. LB