

# My union experience

*the best certificate of my lifetime*

**T**he role of the South African trade union movement in the struggle for democracy is universally accepted and acknowledged. However, not many people understand the extent to which this movement has been shaped and transformed by the transition to a democratic and non-racial society.

One area where these changes in the unions can be observed is leadership. Not only have union activists and leaders undergone a change in lifestyle and outlook, but many of these leaders have been leaving the unions to assume different positions and roles in other spheres of society.

Today, many former union leaders can be found in parliament, provincial legislatures, local government structures, the civil service and in management structures of the companies whose workers they used to organise.

One such former unionist is Nelson Ndinisa, a former president of the South African Railways and Harbours Workers' Union (SARHWU). Ndinisa moved from SARHWU to become a senior manager (government and parliamentary liaison) at Transnet head office in Johannesburg. I interviewed him shortly before he left Transnet.

What makes Ndinisa's story interesting is the fact that his career did not follow the conventional route to the top of the corporate ladder. He literally rose through

*Sakbela Bublangu interviewed Nelson Ndinisa and found that the ex-SARHWU president's experience equipped him to be a manager at Transnet.*

---

the ranks. Among the first jobs he did when he joined the parastatal in the early 1980s was that of 'tea boy', making tea for white technicians and junior management

## **Early life**

But Ndinisa's rise to the top has been a struggle. His grandfather was a farmworker, in the north eastern Cape. Around 1945 the family moved to a rural village in Qumbu in the Transkei where Ndinisa was born. Both his parents were workers - his father was a driver in Cape Town and his mother a factory worker in Johannesburg.

For him, growing up in a rural area was tough: 'Schools are far and you went early in the morning to make sure that you take cows out and all those things and then go to school. And when you come back from school you do the same and take the cows back home.' But he says that the hardship

made him 'strong in life'.

His mother worked hard to get him through boarding school at Osborne High School in Mt Frere. 'My mother was the backer. You know, mothers are always more responsible. I doubt if you can say that about fathers. Mothers, I mean, generally are more responsible than fathers.'

But his education was cut short just before he completed his matric. This was Ndinisa's first taste of a strike and police brutality.

The students challenged the school's regulations and embarked on a food boycott. At the end of the disturbances he and a few other students were expelled for 'instigating' the boycott. He says he was not an elected leader of the students but points out that, 'when there is struggle, naturally people will take the lead'.

## Working in Johannesburg

When Ndinisa arrived in Johannesburg, he worked for different companies as an underground mineworker, a labourer on a construction site and a security guard. He remembers that at the time he did not have a pass, so he had to have money ready at all times to give to policemen in order to avoid arrest. 'Those policemen were the most corrupt people I ever met.'

Then in 1981 he got a job at the South African Transport Services (SATS, now Transnet) as a trainee driver. But he did not get the driving jobs and was moved to the Carriage and Wagon Department as a general labourer. 'There, it was real manual work. So, there was a guy who was the foreman. I was just about 22, so still looking good. The white guy, the white boy said that I could be better making tea. He promoted me to become a tea boy!'

But Ndinisa soon fought with the foreman 'I mean, everybody was afraid of him. He was like a ruler. You know the Afrikaners from the force, somebody just becomes a general. That's what he was'. The fight occurred because white workers wanted to expand his job beyond the role of 'tea boy'.

They wanted him to run around to buy cigarettes, cook their food and so on. 'I refused to do those things. So, they went to spy to "the big one" and said, "he does not want to work". This foreman expected that we must respect him and all the supervisors because they were white'. Ndinisa won the fight and his stand earned a lot of respect among his fellow workers at SATS.

He was later trained by SATS as a train ticket inspector, a job he did until he assumed his new role in the company.

## In the union

Ndinisa and his fellow workers heard about the union for railway workers in 1986 but he says it was hard to get full information because organising was done 'underground'. He credits his mother for playing a critical role in his introduction to trade unionism. She was a shopsteward of the Metal and Allied Workers' Union (MAWU) and she kept union reading materials and booklets which she passed on to Ndinisa.

When the railway workers finally became organised in SARFIWU, they found it to be a powerful instrument to fight management. 'Workers believed that it was genuine because it was not the creation of management,' he says. Although he was instrumental in organising workers into the union, his real baptism of fire came during the big strike of 1987. 'I gained the position of shopsteward and leadership during the strike. I mean, everything was tough. After April we had shootings and

people were killed, people were arrested and virtually all known shopstewards were arrested. Others had to run underground. Now, workers were left leaderless. Then it's where we started to take up leadership. We had meetings and all those things. At the national level there was literally nobody. So now, because of the ideas you pick up in the process, we started to have a view of what the union was, and I mean, when everybody was not there I ended up being put to just act as president in 1987.'

For Ndinisa, the strike was the biggest political gain the workers at SATS made at that time because it proved that the authoritarian and racist culture of management could be challenged 'The workers believed that they could challenge SATS and they went beyond that by demanding their country back.' Membership soared to 40 000 in about three months and life for workers began to improve visibly.

### Leading the workers

After the strike Ndinisa served the union in several capacities - as a shopsteward, branch secretary, regional chairperson, and, from 1992, president. One of the lessons he learned about leadership was that a leader has got to be among his members and lead by example. Thus, in 1987, when workers decided to resort to the use of muthi to 'make them strong' in their confrontations with armed police, he also felt it important to use it.

'I went through those things because I was part of the leadership. I could not be seen to be disassociating myself from them. I had to do whatever it takes. One of the issues you do as a leader is that people must have faith in you and you must maintain unity.'

Before he joined management, Ndinisa saw some changes taking place in the

trade union movement, particularly COSATU. He says that the problem was that before 1994 there was no discussion of what the character of the unions should be after liberation because, liberation appeared a very remote possibility. The unions had become a 'fighting machine' but after 1994 this role changed because they got a sympathetic government which granted new rights to workers and their unions.

He maintains that the changes that occurred made the leadership of the struggle days unsuitable to lead the unions because they had become too close to the new government. 'You found that the people you have been fighting with are on the other side. Now, how do you turn around and fight against the same people that you have been fighting with. As a union leader, it puts you in a predicament.

The problem with the current leadership is that when they go to negotiations with the government, they see somebody they know, a comrade. If they go to the companies they see somebody they have worked with. Anywhere they go, they see somebody they know. That is the problem because workers cannot trust those people. It creates unnecessary tension and that's why they have to move. There must be a transition where new leadership will be born in the process.'

He says that unions are going through a tough period at the moment. But he does not believe that the unions will die "because of the changes in leadership and other problems.

A soul searching process will take place and this will result in the emergence of a new leadership. In his view, the new leaders who will emerge will not judge management and politicians on the basis of their political association. 'The new leaders will be people who say, "So, what

about the ANC? I know they fought for liberation, but I don't know much about that. The only thing I know is that if you are sitting across the table you must either deliver or you are my enemy”

### **Managing at Transnet**

In 1996 Ndinisa was approached by one of the black executive directors at Transnet who offered him the position. By this time he was of the view that the struggle at Transnet had been won and that a career move would not be such a bad idea. 'My view was also that you could not lead in a situation where you are fighting whites and then suddenly when Transnet becomes transformed and there are blacks, but you continue fighting. That would have been some form of contradiction.' He consulted with the leadership of the union and they accepted his decision, even though they were not happy about losing him.

Ndinisa's career progression from 'tea boy' to senior manager is a rather unusual one in corporate South Africa. But there are many other ex-unionists from the 'struggle period' who started working as ordinary labourers but are now in managerial or other senior positions in corporations, the civil service and government.

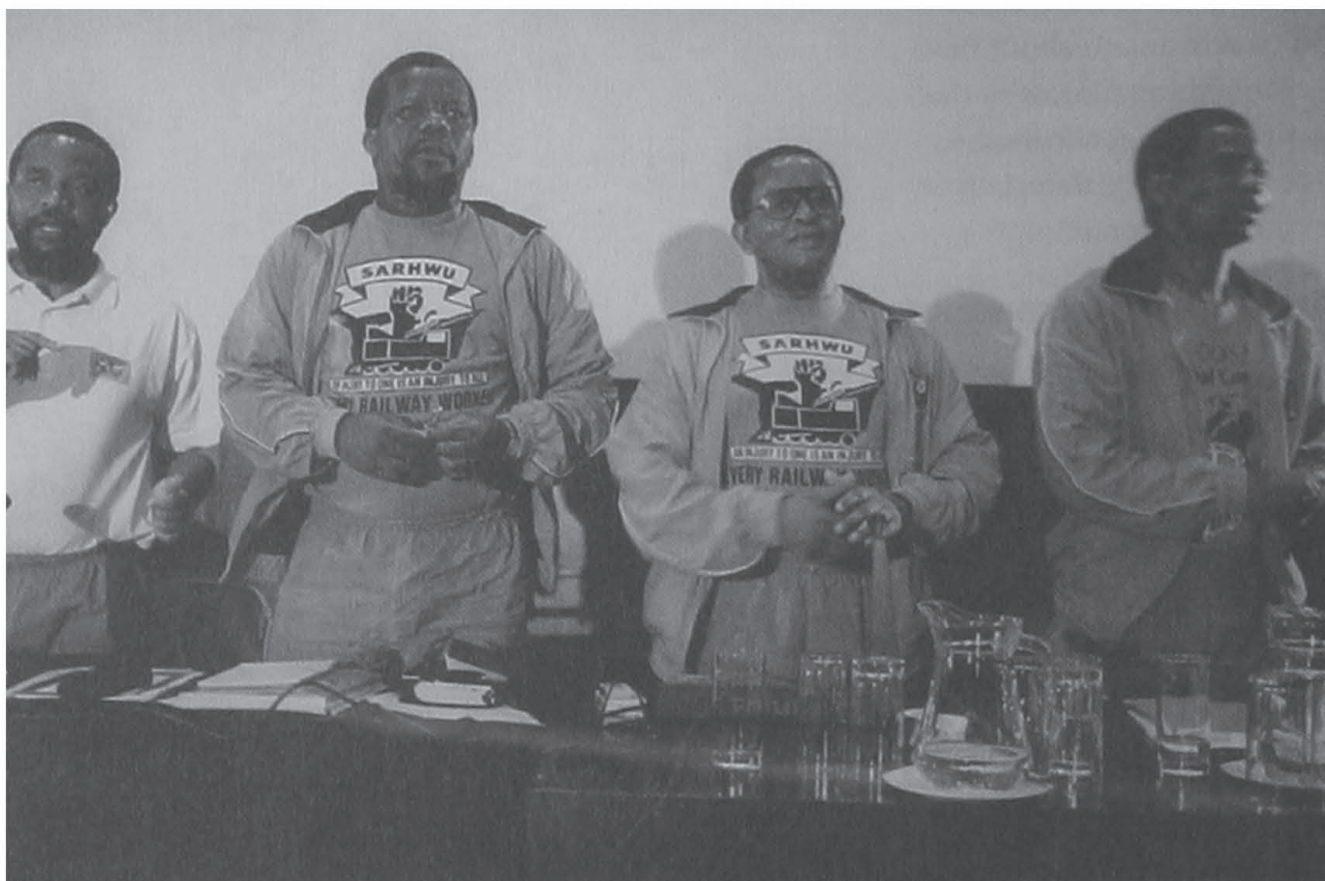
He says that when he started in the 'new job, there were some in management who felt that because he had not gone the conventional route of formal training at university, there was something he lacked. Some were always trying to test his knowledge of the managerial environment.



But he says that he proved them wrong and they came to accept and respect him.

Ndinisa attributes his success in his new job to what he the union taught him. 'Basically, the information I was exposed to and I gained through the trade union movement was the best certificate of my lifetime. I doubt if I could have gained this anywhere else. The union teaches you about life, something which formal education takes for granted. Secondly, it also teaches you to understand human beings. Thirdly, it gives you knowledge in the sense of reading and understanding the environment in which you operate. Those are the critical things which I benefited from and which are key to my success in whatever I have today.

He believes that those managers from



*Nelson Ndinisa learned that a leader has to be among his/her people and lead by example.*

working class backgrounds, like himself, will change the style of doing things in the workplace. 'Those are the only people who will make a difference to the style of managing because they come from the environment, they understand the fears of the workers, they understand the frustration of the workers, and they also understand management because they have been negotiating with them. But if you produce black managers at university and throw them back in the working environment, you are reproducing the same style as that of white managers' He says that many of these university-trained black managers are arrogant and believe that trade unions are monsters to be avoided at all costs.

Ndinisa's background, his experience in the union and his subsequent move into management raises issues about current developments within the trade union

movement. For many union activists and observers, the move by people like him into managerial positions remains a controversial issue. While it is healthy to have that debate, it is important that the debate is informed by a closer understanding of the circumstances of these unionists as part of a generation of activists. Their departure is not simply about them as individuals. It is also about the loss of the experiences of an entire generation and the collective organisational memory of those experiences. This, I would argue, is the most useful way to frame the debate about the so-called brain drain from the union movement. ★

*Sakabela Bublunqo is a lecturer at the University of the Witwatersrand, a staff associate of SWOP and a member of the Bulletin's editorial board*