

'Before advocating one federation, workers must unite at plant level'

November Nkosi, president of the NACTU-affiliated National Union of Food, Wine, Spirit and Allied Workers (NUFWSAW), talks to Snuki Zikalala.

I fully support the question of having one union in one industry. NACTU's initiatives of merging unions organising in the same industry is a great step forward. I believe before one can advocate for one federation, workers must first be united at plant level and a single union formed in that industry.

Our union is affiliated to NACTU. We have no problems with workers wanting to cross the floor and join FAWU (Food and Allied Workers Union - affiliated to COSATU) as long as they are not forced to. I have always maintained workers should not be swayed by politics and political differences should not affect worker relationships during the production process.

I would be naive if I said we have a cordial relationship with FAWU. We did have some serious problems with the COSATU affiliate during its formation. FAWU tried to make inroads in areas where we were organising. This nearly became a serious issue. Presently we have maintained a working relationship with a number of unions, and would like to see these relationships developing.

Early life

I was born on 14 November 1947 in Daggaskraal in the Eastern Transvaal. My father had four wives and 36 children.

I started my primary education in 1957 at

Senzeleni primary school in Daggaskraal and completed my secondary school at Amanzimtoti Training College in 1968.

Immediately after leaving school, not at my own will, I came to Johannesburg and started looking for work. On 28 June 1968, I was employed at General Electrical Company (GEC) as an electrical assistant.

My first involvement with workers was in 1968. The conditions of employment and poverty wages made me organise workers at GEC. I had hardly been in the company a month when an illegal strike was organised. The management accused me of being responsible for the strike and I was summarily dismissed.

On 3 July 1968, I joined the Distillers Corporation in Wadeville where I am still employed.

Having an interest in workers' problems, I was co-opted into the liaison committee. After one year of fruitless struggle with the management, I resigned. It was not worth it.

The Natal strikes in 1974, and lack of union activity in Johannesburg and at Distillers Corporation pricked my conscience. Though it was illegal during those years to talk openly about the formation of unions and political parties, intensive discussions were going on in safe places. Unionists like Ms Vilakazi from the National Union of Clothing Workers and

Thomas Mashinini, an organiser of the Garment Workers Union, encouraged us to form secret cells and recruit workers into a union. Mashinini assisted actively in organising workers in the liquor manufacturing industry.

Organising begins

In 1978, because of pressure from the workers and the Wiehahn Commission's recommendations, Michael Botha - who was then the personnel manager of our company - allowed Mashinini to organise in the factory.

Initially, Mashinini was frustrated by management's strategy. He was allowed to come into the factory during working time, but management would deliberately make it impossible for him to talk to the workers. Because of lack of contact and the absence of workers in arranged meetings, management told Mashinini it was not worth his coming as workers were not interested in a union.

Working very closely with Mashinini and knowing management's strategy, I organised six buses to take workers home after work one day. Permission was granted for a meeting on the company's premises and workers were allowed to stay on after work.

On that day, more than 600 workers stayed behind and listened to Mashinini's gospel. The meeting was very lively and emotional. For the first time workers had the freedom to talk openly about a union and had a feeling of belonging.

The management was shocked. For no apparent reason, there was a power failure and we were requested to leave the premises. I persuaded management to let us stay and organised workers to get candles. The meeting continued.

Working in the wages department as a clerk, I had the advantage of knowing all the workers. I wrote all their names and requested them to sign the prepared stop orders. It was unbelievable. The following day, we submitted the required 50%+1 membership.

The management could not believe that within a short space of time and without cohesion we had recruited the whole factory.

They demanded that their 34 depots be represented before they could give us recognition. Undaunted, we travelled with Mashinini throughout the whole country and organised workers.

Our initial strategy was to organise workers nationally and once each area was organised, a branch executive committee was formed. In every factory we organised we asked workers to elect their own shopstewards. Within a few months, we had set up structures in all the South African wine manufacturing industries.

In an effort to defuse our initiative and stifle our organisational ability, management formed a staff association. This was totally rejected by the workers and we prepared ourselves for the formation of a union.

NUFWSAW is formed

In June 1978 we held an inaugural congress at Kaross Hotel. We had delegates from the already established branches in Natal, Transvaal, Port Elizabeth, Orange Free State, Western Cape and Northern Cape. On that day, the National Union of Food, Wine, Spirit and Allied Workers (NUFWSAW) was formed.

I was elected president of the union, a position I still hold.

Though the formation of NUFWSAW was a major victory for us, we encountered a number of problems in terms of gaining recognition and organising workers from other racial groups. When the act was amended, we applied for registration and strategically we registered as two unions. You must remember that during those days we were not allowed to have a non-racial union. We merged again after the act was amended.

It was only in 1981 that we registered and negotiated an agreement with the South African Wine and Spirit Manufacturing Employers Association. During our first wage negotiations, we struck a 10% wage increase. This agreement applied to all those employed in this sector. Since then we have been negotiating nationally.

NUFWSAW is a worker-controlled union. If you look at our structures, everything comes from the plant. Elected leaders are just servants

of the membership and can be recalled any time. Our head office deals only with administrative matters and the office bearers have no mandate to take decisions without consulting membership structures.

As the president of the union, I run union affairs from the factory. This is where important decisions come from. The union does not have full-time organisers in Orange Free State, Transvaal and Northern Cape. Shopstewards are the ones who recruit at plant level and negotiate with the employers. They thus develop a sense of independence and become more creative.

I am totally opposed to a pyramid structure for a union. Decisions which affect workers must come from the factories. The national leadership intervenes only if there is an impasse.

Trade union independence

I am a member of the PAC, but I have never brought my organisation's politics into the union. When I enter the plant premises, my politics remain in my pockets.

As a worker, I believe one must have one's priorities correct. The only thing that unites workers is wages and conditions of employment. That has to be emphasised. It is rare to find political polarisation at my workplace. We have members of the ANC, PAC, AZAPO and Inkatha, but we have never experienced a situation where their political differences have affected production, working and social relationships.

I am totally opposed to party politics interfering in trade union work. Workers are workers and it is not political parties that brought them together in production.

I believe a trade union must always maintain its independence from a political party. Once a union aligns itself to a political party, it will be difficult for it to criticise that party.

Challenges

The legalisation of trade unions and political parties has to a large extent destabilised us. Workers are no longer militant and their

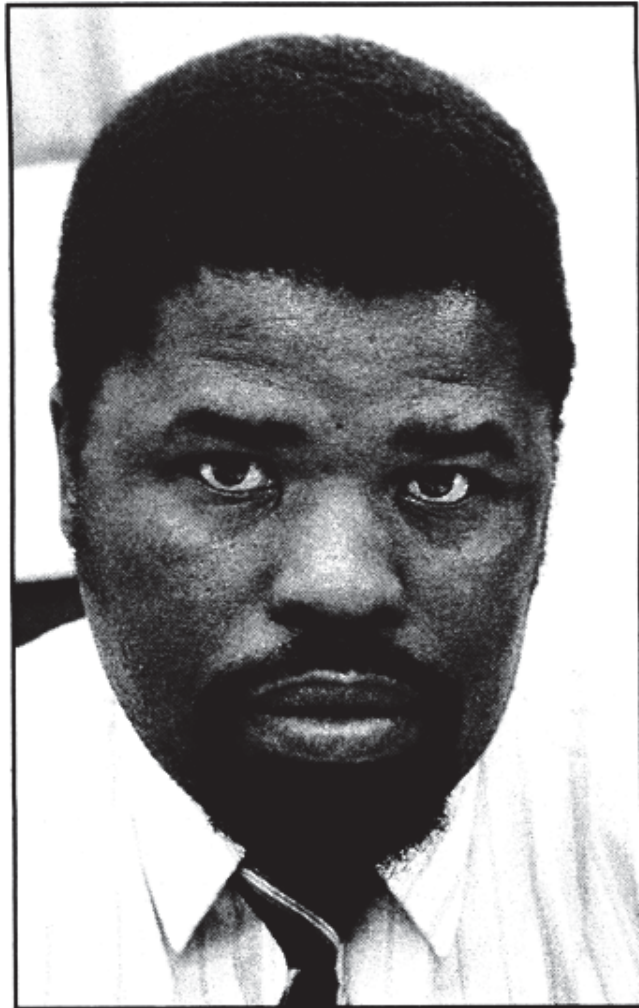


Photo: William Matlala

morale at plant level is very low.

Having a legalised union has made workers take things for granted. The management's politeness and tolerance of trade unions has disarmed us. Workers are no longer fighting for their rights at plant level since they know unions are there to represent them.

We have to find new areas of struggle. Our task as trade unionists is to inculcate a spirit of working class consciousness. Workers must be made aware that the coming government is not going to bring economic changes. Capital and labour have diverse interests and that is why we have to arm ourselves for the battle which is about to begin.

Family and social life

I am married with two children. I enjoy being a trade unionist and will hate the day when I get pensioned off. I really don't have a social life and my wife has accepted it. I would like to see my children being better educated so that they can meet the future with confidence. ☆