

Obituary

Muzi Buthelezi

Chris Bonner spent many years working with Muzi Buthelezi a former general secretary of two major chemical and energy unions. Here she remembers his many fine qualities.

Muzi Buthelezi, former general secretary of the Chemical, Energy, Paper Print Wood and Allied Workers Union (Ceppawu) and one of its founding unions, Chemical Workers Industrial Union (CWIU), died at his home in Vosloorus at the end of December. He had battled with ill health for many years, having only recently recovered from a spell in intensive care following a stroke.

With his passing the union movement has lost a committed trade unionist, who spent almost all of his working life in the service of workers.

Muzi began his working life in 1977 when he joined Triomf Fertiliser in Richards Bay. This was one of a number of large employers in the area which drew in labour from the apartheid



'homeland' of Kwa-Zulu.

Conditions were rough in the factory. Wages were low and job reservation, racism and abuse were the order of the day. Triomf workers, including the young Muzi, began to organise. They became members of the CWIU.

Organising was difficult, dangerous and took courage – a quality that Muzi displayed throughout his life. Workers were afraid of victimisation by employers and the state. They had to meet secretly away from management's eyes. Often they met under trees to discuss union issues, in a seemingly innocent gathering. A former Triomf worker and long time union organiser remembers how workers met in a church hall until the priest was threatened by the police, forcing them to move on.

Workers soon recognised Muzi's leadership qualities, and he was elected a shop steward and then chairperson of the shop stewards' committee.

Muzi will be well remembered by his comrades from Northern Natal not only for his skill and courage in fighting intransigent management, but for his strategic approach to organisational development. He was instrumental in getting the union to agree to a separate branch in Northern Natal. This was resisted by many on the National Executive Committee (NEC) but was later proved to be astute. In his words, "You can understand the problems. There were no organisers. Organisers had to come from Durban. If we wanted to take big decisions with dismissals and things like consulting lawyers we must phone Durban office. So that became a big issue in the union – just whether it

was necessary to set up a separate branch in Northern Natal... The argument in the union by then was the viability of setting up a branch in terms of membership and saying look 'this must be a local' whereas we had a different view. I said, "Look we want to set it up as a branch, and also as a branch they would be able to participate effectively in the Fosatu structures. So that was a struggle and finally then it was set up."¹

I first met Muzi at an NEC meeting of the CWIU held at Wilgerspruit on the West Rand in the early 1980s. This was a typical and well-used venue at the time, being church owned, away from the city centre and simple, even primitive, in its facilities. In the meeting Muzi shone! Who was this confident, articulate, intelligent young man? We were all impressed. It was obvious that this was a person who would make his mark in the union movement and the struggle, and the union went all out to persuade him to become a full-time organiser.

I began to work closely with Muzi when the union 'deployed' him to work in Secunda, the home of the giant Sasol 2 plant. I was Secretary of the Transvaal Branch and the Secunda area fell under the branch.

In 1984, the Congress of South African Students (Cosas) called a two day stayaway which was supported by Fosatu (Federation of SA Trade Unions, forerunner to Cosatu). The workers at Sasol, newly organised, decided to flex their muscle and join the action. Predictably Sasol management took a hard line. Aided by security forces, it dismissed 6 000 striking workers, forced them out of the hostels at gunpoint and onto buses

and sent them back to the 'homelands'.

So, it was a really tough place for a union organiser to work. Workers and the union had just survived a mass dismissal, management was hard, the area swarmed with security forces, the physical surroundings were bleak and facilities almost non-existent. It was into this environment that the union sent Muzi. It was sure that he was the person to best strengthen the union and resist attack in the biggest and most strategic company in the union.

The move to Secunda was difficult for Muzi. He was by then married with children. He had to uproot them from their home and family in Natal and, with great difficulty, find a house in the township, with little assistance from CWIU, which had few financial resources. The fact that Muzi agreed to this relocation is tribute to his deep respect for democratic decision-making and to his commitment to workers and the union. The support of his wife and her courage and commitment in making this move should not be forgotten.

The union could tell many stories of Muzi's work in Secunda and the strong and strategic leadership he provided. For example, he and his team of shop stewards led several successful strikes, especially at the Sasol Mines, where they faced down 'hippos' (armoured vehicles) and armed soldiers.

In 1987 he worked tirelessly to prevent violence being instigated on the mines by the 'third force', and to protect his members and the union. Sadly one worker was killed and several injured when they were attacked on the eve of a



strike. Muzi was there to reassure workers, help the families and arrange for legal assistance. When a giant methane explosion rocked the mines, killing over 30 workers, Muzi once again took responsibility for helping families and workers and setting in motion legal proceedings.

But Muzi was not only a committed union man. He was a human being with all the problems, strengths and weaknesses this implies.

After his election in the early 1990s, first as assistant and then as general secretary, he and I shared adjoining offices and from time to time he stayed with me when searching for a house. It was at this time I got to know Muzi more as a person and as a friend. I came to understand the struggle he had around his health. It was important for him to eat healthily, keep his weight down, exercise and take his medication regularly. The pressures of his job meant that this was difficult and I often had to chide him for ignoring his diet.

I understood some of the financial pressures and practical

difficulties he faced such as keeping his car on the road by teaching himself mechanical skills when he could not afford to take it to the garage.

Apartheid denied him the opportunity to study beyond school, but Muzi was an extremely intelligent person who learned quickly. He was an exceptional strategist and was able to cut through waffle and get to the heart of a problem. However, he keenly felt the limitations of his education and was constantly studying. Unfortunately, many of his attempts fell by the wayside as the demands of the job left him little time. But he had great determination and never gave up. At the time of his death he had succeeded in obtaining an Advanced Diploma in Management and was looking forward to completing the last two years of an MBA degree.

Muzi had to deal with pain and tragedy in his life. In 1997 he lost his small son Kwanele in an accident, and in 1999 his son Thulani was killed. Muzi is survived by three children, two boys and a girl, three grandchildren, and his wife Nompumelelo.

As general secretary Muzi made his mark in the union and in Cosatu, with employers, within Nedlac and in the international trade union community. Employers particularly recall his central role in winning the CWIU struggle for centralised bargaining. This struggle went on for several years from union resolution to final formation of the bargaining council.

This determination was typical of Muzi. He made sure things were done. Central Bargaining had been agreed upon by the union and therefore it had to happen! Not for nothing did he earn the name

'bulldozer' as a result of his absolute insistence that union decisions were implemented!

Unions recall how they wanted him to stand as general secretary of Cosatu and how he resisted pressure to take on this powerful position expressing doubts about his suitability. Muzi was modest about his abilities and was never ambitious for positions of power. He had it thrust upon him and took responsibility when this happened.

In 1998 Muzi became the first general secretary of Ceppwawu, a union formed from a merger between the CWIU and the Paper, Printing and Allied Workers Union (Ppwawu). He played an important role in the development of the new union, and steered it through some internal difficulties, both financial and political. Workers finally 'allowed' him to stand down, and he became the first executive chairman of Ceppwawu Investments. He never lived to see the fruits of the decisions he took and to observe whether his conviction that this was another important area of worker struggle was indeed so.

Over the past 25 years Muzi, supported by his wife and family, played a crucial role in building the union movement in South Africa, in working to overthrow the apartheid regime and in improving the lives of workers. He did this at great personal danger and cost to himself and his family. Muzi, you gave your life for workers. They will not forget your courage and commitment.

Hamba Kahle, dear Comrade.

References

'Struggle for Workers' Rights: A History of the Chemical Workers Industrial Union, CWIU, 1994