

Obituary

A tribute to a worker leader – Phumzile John Gomomo

If a worker and trade union member wants to reach the pinnacle of trade unionism, then they would do well to follow the path of Phumzile John Gomomo who died on 22 January 2008.

Gomomo started working at Volkswagen (VW) in Uitenhage in the Eastern Cape in the 1960s. At that time it was illegal for African workers to join trade unions. Racism was rife, white foremen had the power to hire and fire at will. The joke told by a white manager at the time was that: 'The biggest optimist in the workforce was the guy who brought his sandwiches to work, because he had no assurance that he'd still be there at lunch time.'

And there wasn't just racism between whites and blacks. This extended even to coloureds and Africans. These divisions were reinforced by an apartheid state that gave marginal benefits to coloureds over Africans in the workplace and deprived Africans of skills.

One time VW shop steward and president of the National Automobile and Allied Workers Union (Naawu) in the 1970s, Jurie Harris, recalls how they brought Gomomo into the union:

'Gomomo was serving on the liaison committee (a committee set up by management for workers in workplaces that had few powers). He was the chairman for many years. We struggled to get him into the trade union initially. We targeted him. He was the main person to bring African members on board.'

But it was his ability to bring

together all workers regardless of race that Daniel Dube, Numsa's first president elected in 1987, most remembers.

'The success of Gomomo was in bringing together different racial groups with different politics – some supported Matanzima and the homelands policy, many coloureds supported the apartheid government's tri-cameral policy. He made them focus on the power that they have got inside the factory irrespective of their different skin colours. By focusing on the improvement of their basic working conditions inside the factory, these improved conditions would spill over to their social set-up.'

This unity could be seen when Gomomo and other shop stewards called meetings of all workers at KwaNobuhle (African township in Uitenhage). 'They would gather at Jabavu Stadium and you would see everyone – Africans, coloureds and a few whites,' says Dube.

The power of this unity was evident in breakthroughs that were achieved at VW during that period. In 1980 there was a 'complete shutdown in Uitenhage during the (living wage) campaign for R2 per hour,' Les Kettledas, a Naawu official at the time recalls.

Because VW was a multinational with its headquarters in Germany, Gomomo started to play a strong leadership role and linked up with the VW Works Council in Gothenburg, where the main VW factory was, as well as other cities in Germany. As international links were strengthened he learnt first hand the importance of strong



worker to worker contact across continents and countries.

'Gomomo was the public face of South African workers at German metal union, IG Metall and of course Volkswagen in particular,' says researcher Chris Bolsmann. 'His relationship with German activists, unionists, officials and Works Council members was crucial in ensuring the Uitenhage plant and apartheid more generally remained an important focus in German circles.'

But Gomomo was not a 'clock card' shop steward. His concerns

for his members stretched beyond the factory floor. At a time when community activism could invite attacks from both the left and right, he was involved with community struggles.

'Gomomo was one of the prominent leaders in the community in guiding and advising,' says Dube. He helped to ensure that organised workers took up community issues and used workplace protests, even strikes in some instances, to force companies to put pressure on local government to resolve the problems. And in communities he, with others, encouraged the formation of street and area committees to strengthen democracy within the community.

For all these efforts he suffered personally. His house was petrol bombed and he narrowly escaped injury. Such was fellow VW workers' concern and respect for their leader that 'they took it upon themselves to protect Gomomo - they would sleep inside his yard night after night,' remembers Dube.

When the security police tried to detain him, they came up against the might of VW workers. If Gomomo was detained early in the morning 'by 9am the whole of VW had stopped work and were marching to security police offices in Uitenhage,' says Dube. Workers would threaten VW management that they would only return to work once Gomomo was released. 'And now VW was under pressure because the German head office would not allow the factory to stand still because of anti-apartheid pressure on German companies!' So by midday he would be released. 'No other leader in Uitenhage ever enjoyed that kind of support!'

As vice president of Naawu he played a leading role in the unity talks that resulted in the formation

of Cosatu in 1985 and later when seven metalworkers' unions combined to form Numsa in 1987.

Gomomo was a living example of worker control and democracy. 'He used to fight fearlessly about workers' control and how workers should conduct themselves when they deal with issues of the union at large,' says one time Numsa vice president, and now ANC MP Danny Oliphant.

'When he was president of Cosatu and I was general secretary of Cosatu,' Sam Shilowa, now Gauteng Province Premier recalls, 'Gomomo phoned me demanding to know why I had made a statement to the media without consulting him. He said he needed to know what I had said because if the media then phoned him he would need to be able to respond.'

His commitment to worker control and democracy was to be tested during the mid-1990s when Cosatu became part of the tripartite alliance and had to engage with new government policies such as the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (Gear) Strategy. As

Cosatu President, Gomomo famously responded that for workers Gear meant putting the economy into 'reverse Gear!'

Even when he was elected to parliament on an ANC ticket in 1999, 'he used to take on the ANC caucus,' says Oliphant. 'He would take on the ANC leadership from the president right down to the ministers when issues weren't addressed properly. He was not happy with the implementation of the labour laws.'

At the time of his death he was chairperson of the Portfolio on Public Service and Administration in parliament.

But for all this fame, 'he was a humble man,' remembers Dube. When all the Cosatu leaders were being chosen to go to the new democratic parliament in 1994, 'he never said to Mandela, "I was president of Cosatu, I want to be in the Cabinet,"' echoes Shilowa.

This obituary was written by Jenny Grice of Numsa and was published in the March edition of the Numsa Bulletin.



Gomomo (far right) with former Cosatu leaders

Through the years...

John Gomomo

Over the years, the **South African Labour Bulletin** interviewed former Cosatu President John Gomomo on numerous occasions. As part of this tribute to his contribution to the labour movement, various extracts of previous interviews are highlighted.

The *SALB* interviewed Gomomo, then vice president of the National Automobile and Allied Workers Union (NAAWU) and a full-time shop steward at Volkswagen, Uitenhage in April 1984.

How did trade union organisation begin in Volkswagen?

From 1967 the national Union of Motor and Rubber workers of SA was organised amongst so-called coloured workers. In 1977 the

coloured shop stewards began to help organise African workers. In the process we were able to use the liaison committee to recruit members and organise a union. By the end of 1982 NAAWU and the union structures were firmly established. This followed a general strike and about 30 wild cat strikes.

What are the union's structures inside the plant?

Within the plant each area elects

shop stewards... No full-time organiser comes to the plant. All problems are dealt with by the stewards. The full-time steward's role is to deal with general issues rather than individual grievances... For us the part-time stewards are vital. They work alongside the members. They know what the problems are... There is a danger of full-time stewards losing contact with the workers. We combat this by keeping in close touch with the factory.

The following is an extract from an interview conducted in September 1990.

'With other members of Fosatu in the early 1980s, I helped to build civic structures in Uitenhage, although I did not occupy any leadership position. There was a misunderstanding at the time about the role of the civics and the unions... The unions discussed and debated the situation in their structures. They decided to take the leading role in the community and this was at great cost to the unions, because they had to neglect their union work. The differences between

the Mass Democratic Movement and the unions during the recent strike wave in PE (when community activists intervened without going through union structures were exploited by employers, who know how to create divisions. In May, at a workshop at the ANC offices, questions were raised with the leadership of the ANC Eastern Cape region. Govan Mbeki made it clear that no political organisation should try and take over the duties and responsibilities of the labour movement... Being in the ANC leadership does not demand much of my time. Trade union work comes first and I use my influence there to

encourage workers to join the ANC. The ANC has projected people who have the confidence of the community. But it still needs to be debated what positions should be held by whom. It would be a political mistake to allow the labour movement to back off and let people from the underground and exile take the lead... I joined the party to show to the public that it is the vanguard of the working class struggle. The involvement of the worker leadership shows the dramatic changes in approach of the party, compared with the past... The unions have influenced the party over a number of years.'