

"The strike is still our best weapon"

I was born in May 1955 in Johannesburg in an area called Shanty. The name of the area tells you something about the conditions we had to live under.

My four brothers and I were brought up by my mother without the support of other family members. She is a strong woman who had to struggle to feed us and put us through school. I was forced to leave school in standard nine because my mother could not afford to pay for my books and school fees

At school I had no interest in politics. My only interest as a teenager was soccer. That was partly because there was very little political organisation at my school or in the township. Looking back, I regret not getting involved in the struggle sooner. I'm not saying that I would have given up my love for soccer for anything at the time. If I knew what I know now, I could have contributed a lot to the struggle against apartheid.

It was only when I started working that I became conscious of the class struggle and the need to organise workers. But it was not an immediate understanding of my position as a worker. In fact, it took many years for me to come to a trade union consciousness, least of all a political consciousness.

My working life began in 1979 when I got a job as a general labourer at Macro. Soon thereafter, I went to work for Checkers Warehouse in City Deep. But it was not long thereafter that I was retrenched along with other workers. We were not given any

Mike Malabo, a senior FAWU shopsteward at Nestlé, speaks to Malcolm Ray and William Matlala.

reasons. We were simply told by the bosses that the company could not afford to employ us.

Union activities

In 1985 I joined Wilson Rowntree, which was bought out by Nestlé five years later. In 1991, FAWU members at Nestlé elected me as a shopsteward. I initially refused because I did not feel confident enough to handle the responsibility of leading workers on the shopfloor. Inspired by my friend and comrade Thabo, I soon saw the task as a challenge which I have not regretted

But it was not easy. When I became a shopsteward I had no knowledge of trade union issues like handling disputes and conducting meetings. Of course management took advantage of my ignorance by denying workers their right to meet and recruit new members.

My attitude towards the bosses was shaped by their anti-union approach. At the same time, the scope of union work was growing. This forced me to tackle many organisational tasks before undergoing proper training. A regional structure was established at Nestlé to deal with wages and



working conditions. This was important to us because it gave the union an opportunity to build unity among workers. Unlike Rowntree which bargained at the plant level, all shopstewards at Nestlé could come together from the different depots to jointly strategise on wage negotiations with management. This was, I think, our first victory at Nestlé.

FAWU was very weak in Nestlé which meant that the newly elected shopstewards had to build a union presence from scratch. Workers, like myself, were not accustomed to the idea of union organisation. So it was difficult at first to recruit. Far more difficult was encouraging members to attend union meetings. It was there that they could learn about the workers' struggle.

We also did not have a structured

relationship with management. We had to learn about the company's operation, how it is structured, levels of management and what workers produce in the six divisions of Nestlé. But we gradually built a strong union presence. Today, workers have a sense that they belong to an organisation. This is my greatest achievement as a shopsteward, if you disregard the fact that I have never lost a disciplinary hearing!

Beyond the shopfloor

In 1994 I was elected regional vice chairperson of FAWU. In the same year we went to Pietermaritzburg for FAWU's national congress where I was elected as the union's national treasurer, and two years later as the national co-ordinator of the sales section in Nestlé. From an ordinary shopsteward, this was a giant leap for me in a very short period.

My outlook broadened and I soon saw the need to look beyond the shopfloor to national issues affecting workers, not just in Nestlé but within FAWU and COSATU. Being a national figure helped me to realise that the struggle of workers is linked to political issues.

A disappointment is that very little has changed on the shopfloor since 1994. There have been a number of changes to the law, but workers and shopstewards are still not aware of them. For example, we have had no education on the new LRA.)

The law talks about co-operation between management and the union at the workplace. It also says something about involving the union in planning production. But our relationship with Nestlé management is still based on conflict. Apartheid is still alive in the workplace.

Wages and working conditions have not improved. We are still facing the same old racist bosses who want to maintain the apartheid system and the company's old policies for their enrichment.

Nestlé strike

We will not sit back and wait for things to change. Our recent strike at Nestlé shows that even though we are in alliance with the government, the workers' struggle continues. In February this year we declared a wage dispute with Nestlé. We went to the CCMA on 27 February, but it failed to settle the dispute.

In March we decided to take up our demand for better wages, a centralised bargaining forum and the closure of the wage gap through strike action. We also rejected the limitation the company placed on our scope of bargaining. They argued that we could not recruit members below grade 11 because they fell out of our bargaining unit.

The union gave the company 48 hours notice and we managed to pull off a 6 000-strong national strike which lasted four weeks. In the end we returned to work victorious. We won a 9% increase across the board compared to our original demand of 9,1%.

The strike taught us an important lesson. It is still the most important weapon of workers. Today workers at Nestlé are more united than ever before. Our members look to the strike as an example of what workers can achieve through unity and strength. My belief is that management needs to be pressurised to meet workers' demands and the strike is the most effective way of doing this.

Union investments

As a worker I must confess that I do not understand why FAWU and other unions are investing in business. I think that it is wrong

for a union to buy shares in a company, particularly where there are members. I believe, for instance, that FAWU recently bought shares in Oceana even though we have members there. It is going to be FAWU against FAWU which makes me wonder where we are going as unions.

I think that too many decisions have already been made about union investments without properly discussing the idea in our structures. If things continue the way they are going we are going to have serious problems as a union.

We need to go back to what we were taught as workers about trade unions and determine whether what we are doing now is principled or not. I would not like to see the union becoming a bosses' organisation.

What next?

I would like to pay more attention to my family, which I have neglected. Fortunately, my wife and I think alike so she understands my position. She is a worker at Checkers in Yeoville and a member of SACCAWU. She faces problems with management at the workplace because SACCAWU is not strong. Almost daily we share our experiences as workers which has helped us grow as a family.

Beyond the union, there are things I want to do which I never had the opportunity to do. I want to continue studying. It is important for workers to get an education today because of the requirements of employers. It might be very difficult after so many years to study again, but I try to read and learn on my own.

I have no long-term plan. Perhaps it is time to start thinking about the future. What I am certain of, is that I will continue in the union. The struggle continues and it has a lot to teach me." ★

William Matlala is a freelance photographer