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*general secretary of the
Metal and Electrical Workers Union of SA*

Interviewed by
Snuki Zikalala

We look forward to a merger of the two federations. But this merger must first come from below, from workers at the shopfloor. We are also looking at possible mergers with NUMSA. A number of meetings have been held and the deadlock has been over NUMSA's alliance with the ANC/SACP.

Though we are first looking at possible mergers within NACTU, there are serious problems. The coming congress of MEWUSA in June will decide whether to continue with possible mergers within NACTU or whether to merge with NUMSA.

In these days of economic depression and high unemployment, we need a very strong union. Getting all the metal unions together will be a breakthrough in worker unity.

Early life

I was born in Payneville, in Springs, on 16 April 1945. This was a mixed working class area, with coloureds, Indians and Africans living together. I come from a poor working class family. My father was a driver and my mother a domestic worker.

I wrote matric at William Hills High School in Benoni. During my school days I was the secretary of our football club and the Payneville youth group.

After leaving school in 1966, I was employed as a clerk at Grosvenor Ford. It was a boring job, since I was dealing with car parts and not with people. I left the company in 1968

and joined the Department of Manpower. Here I became directly involved with problems of the working class. I helped workers who were unemployed or had been dismissed without valid reason.

Joining the union

In June 1969, I responded to an advert in the Springs newspaper for an organiser for the Electrical and Allied Trade Union (EATU). This union organising coloured artisans in the Cape was opening up branches in the

Transvaal. EATU was administered by the South African Electrical Workers Association (SAEWA), a white union. [See the interview with Ben Nicholson of SAEWA in the last issue of LABOUR BULLETIN - ed].

Being an organiser for EATU wasn't child's play. Management in the Transvaal was then opposed to Africans joining trade unions. Only white workers were legally protected by their unions.

I had very frustrating experiences. It was difficult to organise workers at plant level or to arrange a meeting with management. Management always intimidated workers and threatened them with dismissal if they joined the union.

With perseverance and determination we made some breakthroughs. In the 70s we managed to get to the negotiation table with management and were allowed to sit in the Industrial Council meetings. We negotiated for

“We were not allowed full participation at the Industrial Council. As a parallel union to the South African Electrical Workers Association (SAEWA), we were represented by SAEWA white general secretary. Independence from SAEWA opened doors for us. We now hold joint rallies with COSATU and NACTU affiliates.”

recognition agreements. At the time I was organising coloured and Indian workers only.

Black workers were represented by a member of Bantu Affairs. Black workers had no direct contact with nor did they know the person supposedly representing them in the Industrial Council. It was disgusting.

Frustrations and breakaway from SAEWA

We were not allowed to talk or raise issues at the Industrial Council. As a parallel union to SAEWA, we had no general secretary and were represented by SAEWA's white general secretary.

We had shocking experiences. We had to sit and observe the negotiation process. It was as if we had no brains, no initiative and no sense of responsibility. I hated the idea of being represented by a white person who could not articulate our grievances. The apartheid structures blocked my brains and made me a mummy in those negotiations.

It was worse on the shopfloor. I would enter a factory and organise workers and after I had spoken about the importance of being in a union my last sentence, which I hated uttering, would be: "Only coloureds and Indians are allowed to join this union." It was humiliating. I felt as if I was being used by the apartheid structure.

Proposals for the training of coloured and Indian shopstewards were always rejected by SAEWA's leadership. The mother union was opposed to seminars. They claimed we wouldn't be able to learn anything in the seminars since we only went there to sing and could not grasp the subject matter. As an organiser, I wanted links with other black unions, but always met opposition from SAEWA's leadership. I was told: "You must do this and not that. You must move in this direction and not that. You must take part in this and not that. You must contact this union and not that one." It was a nightmare.

SAEWA's leadership looked at our problems from a different perspective. They lived in towns and worked under different conditions and yet they wanted to tell us how



Photo: William Matlala

we should conduct ourselves. Working conditions and township life are quite different from what is experienced by whites. You cannot have the same solution for two communities who live in two different worlds.

I did a lot of soul searching, asking myself whether it was worth it. Should I continue to humiliate myself? Should I always be represented by a white general secretary who had no understanding of our desires or aspirations? What haunted me most was the racial barrier which made it impossible for me to organise black workers.

In 1978, I formed the Electrical and Allied Workers Union of South Africa (EAWUSA) which organised blacks. EATU and EAWUSA fell under the leadership of the SAEWU, as they were representing different racial groups.

The publication of the 1979 Wiehahn Commission's report, the amendment of the Industrial Conciliation Act and the Labour Relations Act gave us room to manoeuvre. The executives of EATU and EAWUSA proposed

that a non-racial union be formed in this industry.

However, SAEWA's leadership had serious reservations. They appeared to be afraid of being overwhelmed by workers from EATU and EAWUSA. They rejected our proposal and we had to look for other alternatives.

Pressure from the workers and the Metal and Allied Workers Union (MAWU) contributed a lot. We were accused of being a parallel union with no voice nor representation.

In 1985 we broke away and formed the Electrical and Allied Workers Trade Union of South Africa (EAWUTUSA). I was appointed general secretary, responsible for setting up the structures of the new union.

COSATU missed the boat

At our first national congress, held in late 1985 at Broederstroom, I was elected general secretary of EAWUTUSA.

Representatives of both COSATU and NACTU were invited to attend, but only NACTU responded. In my opinion the input from NACTU's spokesperson persuaded the majority of workers to vote for affiliation to NACTU. Although a number of EAWUTUSA workers were supportive of COSATU, there was no COSATU spokesperson to articulate the federation's policies and principles. COSATU missed the boat.

A decision was also taken to affiliate to the International Metalworkers Federation (IMF).

My next major task as EAWUTUSA general secretary was to establish a single union in the metal sector within NACTU. I approached the Steel, Engineering and Allied Workers Union (SEAWUSA); Black Electrical Workers Union and the United Motor and Allied Workers' Union (UMAWUSA) on the question of unity.

In May 1989 we managed to unite with some NACTU unions to form the Metal Electrical Workers Union of South Africa (MEWUSA). SEAWUSA and UMAWUSA said they were not ready for the merger as they had internal problems, but would join later. I was elected general secretary of MEWUSA.

Independence from SAEWA opened doors for us

Since the breakaway from SAEWA we have gained recognition and respect from COSATU and NACTU unions. Our horizons have been broadened, in terms of getting more engaged in the struggles of workers and of the oppressed masses. We have had joint campaigns together with COSATU and NACTU unions.

Presently I am on the Central Committee of NACTU and am its representative in the National Economic Forum. I also represent workers at the Industrial Council. Internationally, I am MEWUSA's representative at the IMF.

As a person who has been humiliated on several occasions, I am doing my level best to see to it that workers' aspirations and feelings are being represented at every forum.

Political and family life

MEWUSA's first congress resolved to be non-aligned to any political party, although individual members can belong to any political organisation. MEWUSA is not apolitical.

Because of the intensity of my work and lack of free time, I have not joined any political organisation. My sympathies lie with the ANC, not the PAC. This might be surprising, considering I am in NACTU's CC. I am committed to my federation.

I am married with two daughters and a son. My family is very concerned that I do not spend enough time with them. My son, an athlete, would love to see me at the sportsgrounds every Saturday. When I cannot make it he becomes sulky. I have never been next to him when he needs me.

My wife, a data processor, is quite upset with me. She thought after the release of Mandela and all the political leaders, we would lead a normal family life. But life has not changed. I am hardly at home and when I am there, I have to catch up with reading and prepare for the coming meetings. Most union meetings take place on Saturday.

It is difficult to satisfy your family and the workers. Someone always suffers. It bothers me a lot. ☆

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