

Unionism of the heart

I was born on 15 July 1943 in Bulwer, close to Pietermaritzburg in Kwazulu-Natal. I am the sixth of seven brothers. I went to school at the Roman-Catholic church until standard five. I did my standard six and seven in Ixopo. After that, I went to Mariannhill as a carpenter and bricklayer. In 1959 I started ministry school.

I worked as a clerk on the mines for eight months. I moved to the East Rand in 1963 because I was a soccer player. I played soccer for Katshehong City and worked as a carpenter at the Germiston municipality.

I now stay in Katshehong. I have a wife and four kids. They call me Baba ka Thulani, because my son's name is Thulani. My one daughter passed away after the 1994 elections. Her children stay with me and my family. My son is working in engineering in Alrode. The youngest sister was studying design, but her school closed down.

MAWU

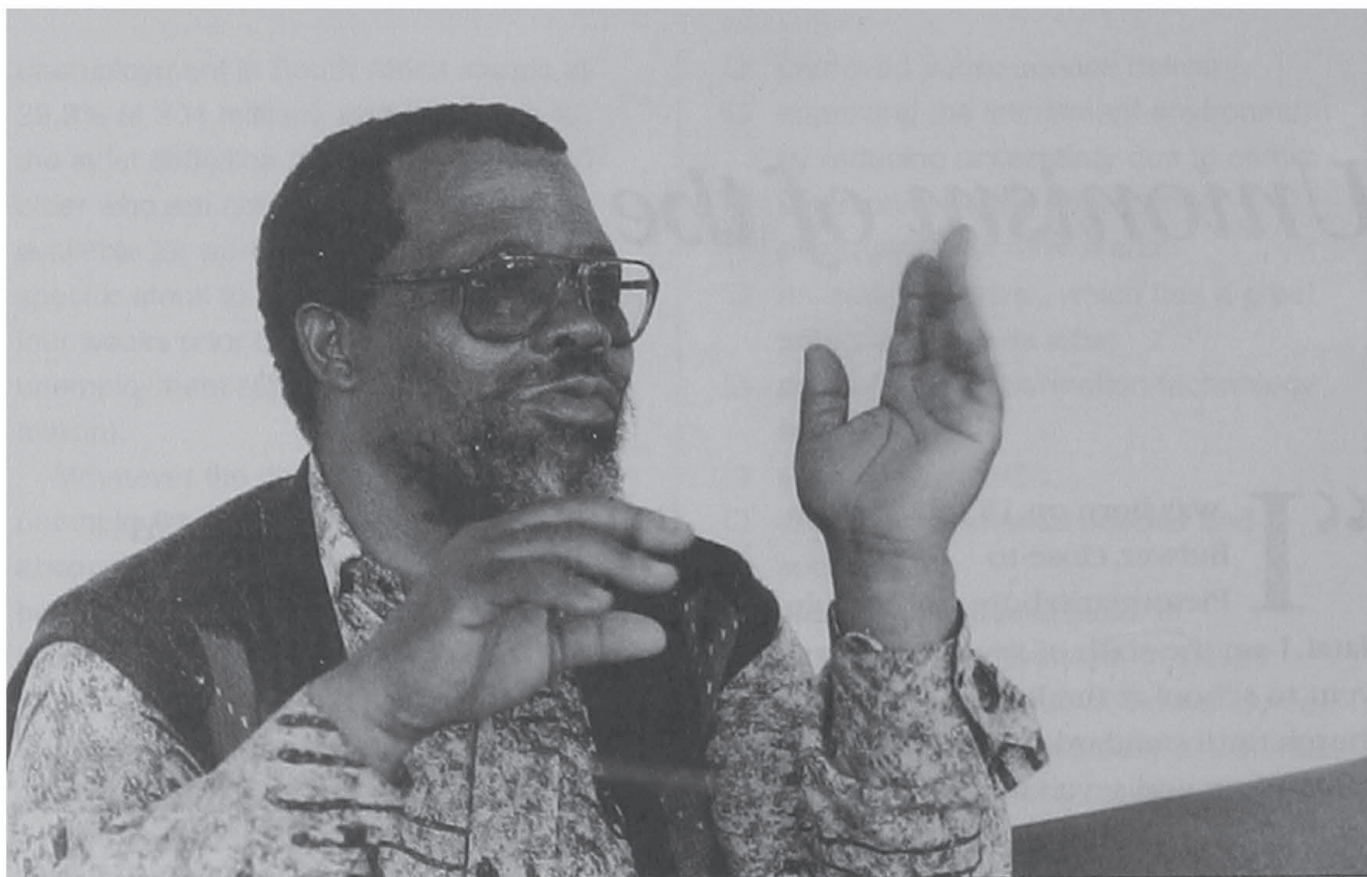
I was dismissed by the Germiston municipality because I questioned everything. At the end of 1965, I started working at Lightmaster. The workers called the general manager *njandene* (dog in isiZulu) because of the things he did to the people. I had heard about a union called MAWU (Metal and Allied Workers' Union) operating in Pietermaritzburg. One

*Richard Ntuli, NUMSA
organiser for the Wits East
region, talks to Etienne Vlok
and William Matlala.*

of my cousins was involved in the 1973 strikes. I told the workers about this union that can bring us together.

Management imposed the so-called 'working committees' at the time. We refused to participate, because we wanted real representation. We got Moses Mayekiso and Bernie Fanaroff from MAWU to explain about unions. I took the platform and said to the workers that we must join the union. We got enough workers to join and, with Moses, wrote a letter of introduction of the union to the management.

We had a strike in about 1981 or 1982 because of wages. We were earning R2,50 per hour. It was big money then. They threatened us with dismissal. I told them that it was not a problem and that they should prepare our money. While they were gone, I told the workers that we should go back to work to see what management would do. When they came back, they saw us working. They said that this was nonsense, and that we must go. I asked them whether they were dismissing us now and told them that we were there



to work. At five o'clock they were standing at the gate and gave envelopes to those whom they had identified as troublemakers. They dismissed them. Bernie and Mayekiso wrote letters to management. We won the case in the end and all the workers were reinstated.

At Lightmaster we organised 279 of the 285 workers. The other six were supervisors. I started working as a full-time shopsteward. At the end of 1983 we asked for an increase. We went on strike for six days. At the end of the six days they locked us out. The case took three or four years to be resolved but we won it. They did not employ us shopstewards again and gave us R65 000 to divide among all of us.

Iscor

I was then the Transvaal chairperson and national treasurer of MAWU. Because they dismissed me, everything fell away. MAWU instructed me to take a job at Iscor at KwaMasiza. After a while I wrote to Iscor and introduced MAWU. They refused to let

us organise there but I said to them that we had a right to talk to the people. Management said that I needed to get a third of the 29 000 workers of which 17 000 were blacks. I brought together all the indunas and supervisors at the hostels and bought beers for them. I gave each person a MAWU registration form and another copy for their friend also. I told them to meet me again in two days with their friends. Two days later, I gave everyone another form to give to their friends. I managed to come back with 8 500 stop orders.

MAWU started organising in Wadeville. Johnson Manje and I targeted the big factories and moved from one to another to organise the workers. Bernie and Mayekiso were so good with planning and organising. They gave us good strategies on how to organise, which we used very successfully.

Change

At that time, things were not as easy as today. We struggled to get management to

agree with us. When you introduced the union, management refused and said that they wanted an agreement first. This would take two or three years, because we would not agree on many things.

Nowadays, shopstewards and organisers can tell you about the LRA, but they cannot use it against the employers. In the past we had strategies to put the employers under pressure. Now shopstewards and organisers are always under pressure. I do not know why, but it is happening. They cannot even defend a guy who has been dismissed.

Management is different from what they were in the 1970s and 1980s. Then they were still in the old regime and their thinking was also in the old regime. They did not allow full-time shopstewards and were not prepared to listen. Now there is a chance of talking to them and to come up with ideas. The language of today compared to then is not the same. Management would insult us and not listen to us, and we would insult them. If you were to do that now you would look stupid. Only the motor employers are not prepared to change. I saw in the strike of September that they are still far behind. It is a new thing for them to have a strike. At the end of the day, they will change.

Jobs

Government says to us that there are no jobs. They want to cut workers' wages to create jobs. But if they want us to build up the economy, they must pay more. Then everybody will have enough money and will be able to buy. They will buy a car and then they will need tyres, oil and petrol. This way, everyone will be working. The person will then move from a small house to a big house. They will want to change the bedrooms and this will create more jobs. If you get a small wage, what can you do with it? You can just buy

mealie meal and wonder how you will survive the rest of the month. Is that going to make the economy grow? Higher wages are going to make the economy grow.

This language of saying half a bread is better than a whole one is *sommer* (just) nonsense. If you have half a bread today, you can eat now, but what about tomorrow? It is out for unions to say that our people should not strike because it will cripple the economy. Let the people pay, and then the economy will grow. They say that labour costs a lot of money, but how much do workers get? Some people get very high salaries while others get only R6 per hour. To lift up the economy, the business people must be prepared to pay. This will boost their businesses.

Family life

My wife was so good to me during the bad days. When I was gone for two or three weeks, she understood and supported me. In my family, my wife is number one. Even my kids supported me. My son helped me in 1993 and 1994 when we were trying to bring peace to the East Rand. I brought together the IFP, the ANC and the businesses. We cleaned up the townships, section by section. In the early 1990s when the taxi wars started, I helped there too. Now Katorus is quiet.

Gold

Harry Gwala was my teacher at school when I was in standard six. He told us about unions. I questioned him on it. He said it was when you get together and become one. Being in a union is wonderful. When I was young, I was not talkative. Now, after 25 years in the union I am talkative. To me it was worth gold being in the union. I have it in my mind and in my heart. I am always planning how to bring people together." ★