

Unions and business

"I was born in 1958 in a village called Aconhof in the Northern Province. I have five brothers and five sisters. Both my parents are pensioners.

My most vivid memory of my mother is a woman with a plate of fruit on her head selling food to migrant workers through the windows of buses and trains. Most of the residents in Aconhof were migrant workers.

My mother eventually left Aconhof to work on a farm in Bushbuckridge in 1962. My family was torn apart because of this. I was very often not allowed to attend school because of my duties on the farm.

In 1964 I left Bushbuckridge to live with my uncle. I went through primary school and most of high school without seeing my parents or my brothers and sisters.

Work

I matriculated at the end of 1978. There were people from Johannesburg who were scouting for soccer players for what was then Spoorweg (Transnet). I spent a lot of my spare time playing soccer. The scouts chose 15 players, including myself. They said that we would be tested before we were employed by Spoorweg. In January 1979 I was given a job.

If you were black, you were expected to be a labourer. It did not matter whether you had a matric or no education at all. My

Robert Mashego, SARHWU Gauteng regional chairperson, speaks to Malcolm Ray and William Matlala.

first job was as a cleaner and messenger at Parkhill Gardens, a training college for train drivers. I worked long hours during the week and had to cut grass during weekends. I earned R80 per month.

Dismissal

In 1980, we played Wits University at Milpark stadium. It was a Friday afternoon. My boss refused to give me permission to leave work. I sneaked out of work at midday. On Saturday, we played another team. Saturday was also a working day. On Monday my boss physically assaulted me after an argument about my absence. I fought back. But he dismissed me.

Fortunately, the sports manager of Spoorweg was sympathetic. He saw to it that I was re-employed at the Spoorweg's Delmore hostel as a kitchen labourer. But I lost two years of service because of my dismissal.

Conditions at the hostel were just as bad. I started work at 4.30 in the afternoon. I had to serve tea and pap to workers who were either returning from work or coming on night shift. My shift

ended at 11.30 at night. A year later I decided to take a course in heavy duty driving.

Getting organised

In 1981, I started working as a shunter for Spoorweg. The job carried a great deal of responsibility. I had to move railway trucks from one railway line to another. My life as a trade unionist began then. I had no choice. Management forced all black workers at Spoornet to join the Black Trade Union (BLATU). I refused to join BLATU because it was not affiliated to any organisation. As a loyal ANC supporter, I could not see myself being neutral at work.

In 1983 a group of workers met in Johannesburg to discuss a strategy to organise workers into a militant union. The last big meeting that we had was in Jabulani where we adopted a charter and a programme of action. The launch of COSATU presented us with an opportunity to build a strong affiliate in the railway sector. But conditions at Spoorweg were extremely repressive. The railways fell under the National Party government and we could not organise workers openly. Many of us volunteered to organise workers after hours.

Recognition

Our task was to take SARHWU into COSATU. Things turned ugly when workers split into two factions - BLATU and ourselves. A third faction pushed for the formation of a new union called the National Union of Railway Workers. So there were deep divisions.

Between 1985 and 1987 we struggled to win a majority. The bosses opposed us at every turn. Our members were growing impatient. We were tired of begging for crumbs at the negotiating table. BLATU did not have the muscle to

fight for us. We were looking for an opportunity to mobilise workers. Management fell into the trap by dismissing a worker for alleged theft.

Strike

We seized the opportunity and downed tools. Our fight was not necessarily for worker's reinstatement. Even though he was reinstated, our strike for continued.

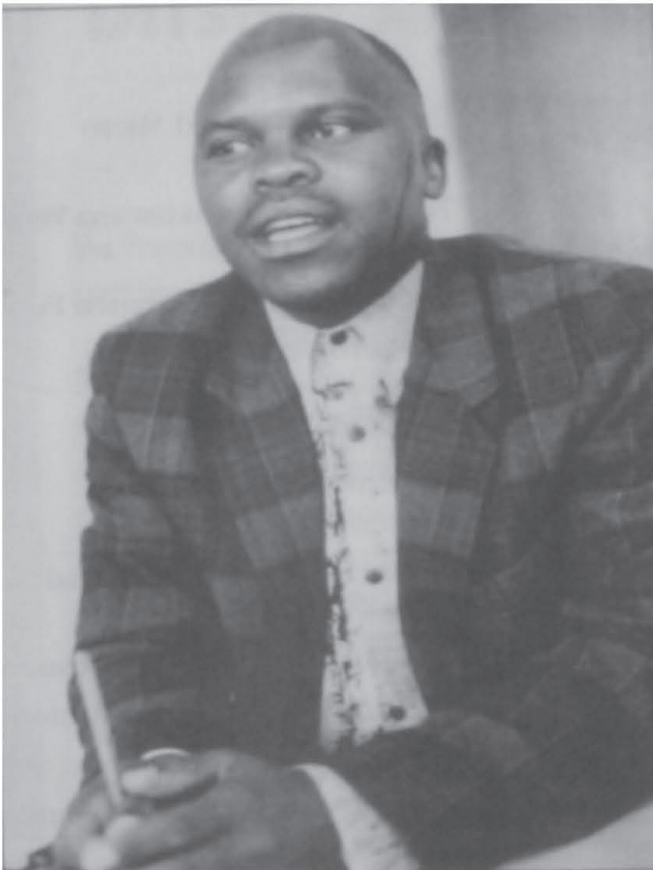
Management gave us an ultimatum: return to work by 27 April or be Members were unanimous in their decision: the struggle will continue!

It was extremely difficult to co-strike activities because of the absence of formal structures and full- was mandated to mobilise workers in area between Boksburg and Witbank. By the end of April, we planned to meet at Welgedagt sports ground. None of our members reported to their depots. The railway service was brought to a standstill. Confidence among striking workers was growing.

The rally at Welgedagt is a day many railway workers will never forget. came to the stadium in railway trucks. of the trucks was stopped by police and 30 workers were arrested. Police surrounded the stadium. We were given five minutes to return to work or We responded by singing songs and toyling. A few minutes later, all hell let loose. Policemen, armed with batons and shields, stormed the stadium. We fought back with our weapons. Nine soldiers and a number were injured.

Victory

Each region reported the days activities the strike committee in Germiston later that day. The police entered the hall no warning and shot indiscriminately at with live ammunition. More than 200



people died. The rest of us were arrested and taken to a charge office at the Germiston railway station.

At the end of 1987 we returned to work after forcing management to sign a recognition agreement. Our struggle was victorious, but at great cost.

Worker unity

There was a similar strike in 1989. This time, it was a conflict between BLATU and SARHWU. Many more workers died in the clashes that took place.

Uniting workers in the railway sector is still one of the biggest challenges today. I am responsible for co-ordinating merger activities with BLATU in the Gauteng region. We have already started a programme of action to integrate structures of BLATU into SARHWU.

Many problems stand in the way of unity. Workers are still bitter about the conflict in 1989. Another factor is the deep racial divisions. White workers are still very conservative. They do not feel

comfortable uniting with black workers.

We are also worried that integrating structures of other unions into SARHWU could create organisational problems.

Business unionism

SARHWU has come a long way since 1987. We have developed from a militant union into a business minded organisation. I am one of the directors of SARHWU's investment arm called Iskonyana Cleaning. The company is a joint venture between SARHWU and Super Care. We own 51% of the shares. I'm also an acting director of Super Care.

The idea of union investment companies is still new to workers. There is a conflict of interests between the union's stand against privatisation and the investment company's role in the privatisation of the airways and railways. I am personally opposed to privatisation. At the same time I am not opposed to the union investing in privatised companies. I believe that it is pointless singing slogans about workers taking control of the means of production without doing something about it.

There is also a danger of union investment companies being misled for personal gain. I do not believe that a leader of a trade union should head the investment company.

There are times when I have to take my union cap off and become business minded. For example, when workers at Super Care demand a wage increase, I have to negotiate with them as a director based on sound business principles.

Family life

My wife died in 1992. I have two children, a boy and a girl. Being a full-time shopsteward and a councillor for the ANC in Brakpan is a full-time occupation. I don't have time to think of anything else at the moment." ★