

'We are trying our best!'

I was born in 1969 in Pimville, Soweto and grew up there. Pimville was a difficult place to grow up in because it was rough. At night you would hear screams and in the mornings when you woke up and walked down the street you would see bodies lying there and people stabbed to death. But my parents taught me what to do. I was close to my family.

Getting involved

When I came from school I would drop my bags at home and go into the streets to play soccer. I would usually end up in a fight and when I got home, my mother would ask me what happened and give me a slap. So I changed.

When we went to the hospital, I saw the doctors helping people, especially the ones that were stabbed, trying to save their lives. I also wanted to help and decided to become a doctor.

I grew up with no interest in politics but as time went by, that changed. I started doing economics at school and realised how important it was for a youngster to be active in politics. Economics brought me to politics. With the 1976 Soweto uprisings I was doing grade two. I was disturbed by the way Africans were treated, especially concerning Bantu education. I adopted politics. I was a member of COSAS and an SRC member at high school. Being involved in those

Etienne Vlok and William Matlala interview Billy Nkosi, NULAW shopsteward and Gauteng branch chairperson.

structures ensured I got exposure.

After matric, I wanted to further my studies so I looked for employment to finance my studies. However, I did not realise my dream because of the high fees charged by the universities.

Joining United Frame

I asked my mother who was a machinist at United Frame for help. I went for interviews there and was employed in 1983. If it were not for my mother I would not be where I am today. I am very close to her. Today she is still a machinist at United Frame.

My first job was as a force blaster. I was retrenched after six months but a year and a half later the company asked me to join it again.

Union for leather workers

I initially joined SACTWU because we believed that because we came from the townships we should join a COSATU union due to its links with the ANC. I did not stay with SACTWU for a long time because it was a union for the clothing

industry and did not represent my interests as a leather worker. I decided to join NULAW six years ago because it served the interests of the leather workers.

After two years I was elected as a shopsteward and have been one ever since. I was scared to stand for election but I am a person who believes in himself and I saw it as an opportunity to protect people through the union. I realised there were problems between the workers and the employer when I became a shopsteward. The employers cannot say they will protect the workers, the shopsteward and the union will protect the workers.

I am branch chairperson as well now. I must make sure that the office runs smoothly, that everyone is doing his/her work and that the organiser's problems are solved. At our branch executive and general meetings I sit in and listen to the report backs. This branch services about 40 factories and 1 800 members around Johannesburg. This figure has gone down due to retrenchments and liquidations. But there is potential in this branch. In the past, footwear comprised the majority of our members but due to retrenchments and liquidation that has dropped off. Our main growth point is now the tanning sector.

A sunset industry

This is a sunset industry. We don't know what will happen to it in two years' time. Illegal imports and low tariffs are threatening it. It is important that government keep tariffs at an acceptable level. It is difficult to compete with Asia where there are low wages, long hours and even child labour. We cannot produce the same as those countries.

Regarding illegal imports, if you walk down a Johannesburg street, you see all

these shoes being sold on the pavements. Similar shoes are produced locally for R170 but on the street they cost R45 so people would rather buy that. It is killing the industry. Government must stop it, and monitor and search places where imports come in.

Another threat is the outsourcing of work to factories that are not registered with the bargaining council. This is detrimental to the employees. COFESA, a body of independent contractors, is a threat to the industry especially in KwaZulu-Natal.

The employers say they have no more money and close the company. After a few days they will say we are moving to COFESA, which gives work to the workers to do at home. The workers then get paid per pair of shoes completed. The workers do not receive any benefits and are only paid for what they produce. We will fight them to the bitter end.

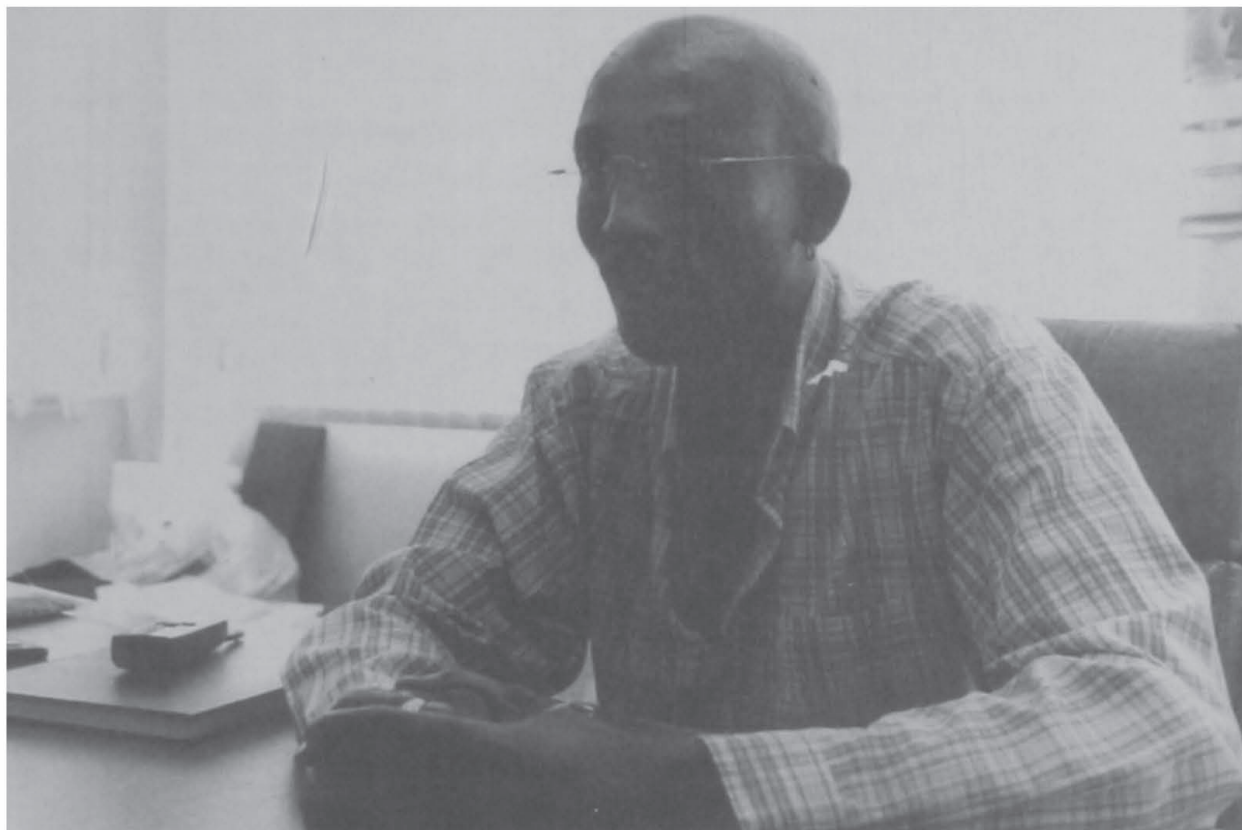
Four or five years ago NULAW had 20 000 members but now we only have 11 000 because of retrenchments and liquidations. Unless the government intervenes in the measures and ways I mentioned above the industry will go down.

The employers do not care and the workers suffer. The union has come up with a strategy that I don't want to talk about too much now. We are trying our best.

Freedom of association

Why are we with FEDUSA? Because NULAW is not affiliated to a political party and is an independent union. We did not want to join a federation where we have to be affiliated to a party. Here we have all parties: ANC, DP, IFP, PAC. In this union we have freedom of association.

When you grow up and you see the changes in the federation you supported



as a child, you lose faith. I saw that COSATU was not my home and looked for a better place. It is difficult because COSATU represents workers but they are also in an alliance with the ANC. Whom is COSATU serving? You cannot serve two masters. My view is that COSATU is not my home.

Staying put

I am experiencing problems with shopstewards leaving the union. In December last year three good shopstewards at one company left the union and joined the company. The management strategy was to give jobs to the unionists to remove them because the union was a threat.

There is nothing that I can do. If they do not have workers' interests at heart then they must leave.

My heart is with the trade unions and NULAW. I cannot abandon the union now because it will be a major setback. I want

to see myself being someone in NULAW. I don't want to be the same branch chairperson in five years. If I obtain a higher position I will still serve the members as I do now under the guidance of the general secretary and president.

No free time

I currently live in Meadowlands, Zone 1. I don't have any free time. Most of my time is spent reading labour acts and focusing on union activities. If you are a chairperson of a branch you must know the acts for when you go to the employers. I like listening to R&B music, especially Tom Braxton, when relaxing and enjoy watching cricket and golf.

One of my main influences has been my organiser, Douglas Diale and I would like to thank him. He taught me union politics, guides me, says what route I should take and instructs me on how to control my emotions. Without him I would not be where I am today. ★