

'Why must I work under a police state'

Cosatu's outspoken Alina Rantsolase

In November 2010 **Alina Rantsolase**, a powerful and determined former national treasurer of Cosatu (Congress of South African Trade Unions), passed away. In this 2005 interview with **Kally Forrest** she talks about among other things, a sustained vindictive attack on her from Checkers management, which she courageously fought off.

How did you come into the union?

I joined in 1978 in the Orange Vaal Branch of Ccawusa (Commercial Catering & Allied Workers Union – later Saccawu). I was recruited by Vivian Mtwa, who later became the general secretary.

I was working in Checkers Avcon Park a very conservative white area. Other workers were too scared to join so I was the only union member. I was earning R100 a month and others R78 after working for the store for as long as ten years.

I was elected to the Ccawusa Orange/Vaal Branch Executive Committee (BEC) in 1979 where I helped build the branch and I recruited some powerful women including Dinah Nhlapo, later Ccawusa national treasurer, and Mrs Mboya from Sasolburg, as well as shop stewards from Vereeniging and OK Bazaars like Mongezi Hadebe the branch secretary and Joe Williams an office bearer. We created an active branch with high attendance by workers at BEC meetings and regular well-attended general meetings in workplaces.

I also worked with Jeremy Daphne a white organiser who was well educated. In the early days whites were not always popular in

the union. Ccawusa's policy was not to employ whites, in order to promote black leadership. Jeremy was working in Johannesburg where it was not easy for him especially as Emma (Mashinini, general secretary) did not like him. He was released to the Vaal and we embraced him. He was earning R50 a month. We were protective of him. He educated and assisted us and gave us more power. He was patient and committed. We were proud of him. We did not kow-tow to Emma who liked to be the Big Mama.

As the only member, how did you manage to organise your workplace?

In the early 1980s it was a struggle. There was a liaison committee and fearful workers were not straight with managers but I started to explain worker grievances. Slowly managers called on me with worker problems but the company absolutely refused to recognise the union.

I made workers' complaints known. I complained that they wanted uniforms like at other stores, but management told me that they could buy their own white shirts if they wanted a uniform. So I asked the union

to donate white union t-shirts with a logo and slogans on them. Workers arrived looking smart in their t-shirts and management informed shop stewards that they regarded this as industrial action. I argued that the union t-shirts were cheaper especially as management had told workers to get their own. I made my point and workers got uniforms from Checkers head office.

In 1983 Checkers union recognition negotiations began. It was difficult to negotiate the agreement as company lawyers used high legal terms so I had to listen and learn.

After winning recognition, membership increased and in 1985 the first wage bargaining began. At first shop stewards were quiet, listening to union officials. But one of the organisers trained them. He told them how to find out facts, do research and attend regional and national negotiations. So shop stewards from Greentmans, Checkers and Stuttards motivated for an increase to employers and they won their first increase of R45 per month. In 1986 however everyone received an increase of R100 except me who got R5 as management claimed I was too busy working for the union.

How did you deal with this discrimination?

In 1983 there was an uprising in Vaal townships so management tried to intimidate me into resigning. It called in plain-clothed security to follow me wherever I went in the store. After two days I asked the store manager, 'Why must I work under a police state?' I was told that everyone needed to be protected. Other shop stewards called a union meeting which the security guards attended. Management was invited. I spoke about my harassment and the company was forced to tell security to protect the store from outside the premises.

In 1984 management accused me of stealing something I had paid for. They called me into the office and tried to handcuff me. I flatly refused and physically fought them off. They took me to the entrance for all workers to see their queen had fallen. All the managers came out to watch the police taking me away. It was a Friday so I had to stay over the weekend in police cells.

On Monday the magistrate dismissed the case for lack of evidence. The company appealed the judgment and for the whole of 1985 I was unemployed waiting for the hearing. The union took up my case and it was thrown out of court for lack of evidence. In 1986 I was reinstated, and shop stewards insisted this must be with no loss of status or benefits.

Then a new manager arrived and it was clear head office had warned him about me. His strategy was to promote me out of the union bargaining unit so that I could no longer be a member and represent other members. He appointed me as the first black supervisor and wanted me to become part of the management team but I insisted on remaining a clerk.

I was given the job of inventory controller and when national



Alina Rantsolase, former Cosatu national treasurer.

buyers overstocked the store, management agreed to give me powers of sale and return. I assessed the stock and sent certain supplies back. Local management appreciated my efforts and decided not to use national buyers again. People at head office however began to dislike me.

When I returned from leave, management informed me that the job of inventory controller had been upgraded to a management position and a white woman arrived to train me. I insisted on talking to Paul Fox, the human resources manager at national level. I told management that 'if my position changes you must

consult me, not just tell me I am a manager. I need a written guarantee of my position when I go on leave. If management is going to create a position I must apply with everyone else.'

Mr Fox did not arrive and so for a month I waited and refused to work in the upgraded position. Finally they left me in my position and I was also given the same salary as whites in similar positions whom I had trained.

A while later the store again got a new manager, Dave Hagan. He had also been warned about me. I realised that he was trying to dismiss me and that I must build up a case. He tried to provoke

me but I did not respond. If he refused me a tea break, I wrote it down. When he threw luggage from the shelf onto the floor and expected me to pick it up, I wrote it down. When I was not paid for doing night shift, I wrote it down. Union members thought I had been co-opted by management but I told them to wait.

After a while I invited the divisional manager to attend a shop stewards' meeting. I went through all my notes to show how local management had behaved. The divisional manager forced Hagan to apologise. After this management's relationship with me improved.

What struggles did you wage after that?

When Shoprite took over Checkers in 1991 things changed. Shoprite didn't want to negotiate wages – R450 a month was the highest wage in our bargaining unit at that point. It cancelled the uniform allowance, there was no provident fund and it instituted a wage freeze.

Saccawu (South African Commercial Catering & Allied Workers Union) decided to interdict Shoprite in 1991 for settling wages without consultation as laid out in the recognition agreement. We wanted a guarantee that all agreements would remain. We staged an all night *siyalala* (sit-in) at the lawyer's office. It's very nice to be a leader of women, they were militant.

A few months later Shoprite cancelled the recognition agreement. We immediately staged a three-week strike to fight for its reinstatement. Jeremy was upfront and truthful with us and told us to go back as he feared for our jobs. The agreement was partially reinstated and management agreed to negotiate the matter further. From that point they consulted the union.

Has there been a change in the work environment since the 1980s?

Yes a big change. In the 1980s there were few casual workers and they were governed by a wage determination which said after six months they must become permanent. It was better in the eighties in this regard.

In the 1990s Shoprite started to employ a lot of casuals and created flexi-time work. At least 75% of staff became casuals. Then Sectoral Determination 9 (SD) was introduced in 2003 and it stipulated that casuals must be phased out and put on a grading scale. The SD speaks about hours but not about other conditions and benefits. So Shoprite gave everyone a new letter of employment which excluded a provident fund as it did not want to pay for all these casuals who were becoming permanent.

Management said the SD was confusing so it could not implement it. We then declared a dispute and insisted that we bargain outside the SD for all workers who were part of the bargaining unit. But it is difficult because workers are more submissive than in the 1980s, they don't fight like they used to.

Of course many things are better than in the eighties. The racism like separate canteens, worse food for black staff and so on has gone.

What positions have you held in the union?

From 1993 to 1999 I was elected national treasurer of Saccawu. In 1993 Saccawu had a R5-million overdraft. We were about to collapse and be liquidated. There were no invoices, no proper accounting, no staff benefits. I worked over three years to put Saccawu back on its feet and create a strong finance department. I worked at night and weekends.

Then I was elected Cosatu's national treasurer in September 1999 [first woman in this position]. A treasurer must be independent and if people don't like what you say they sometimes tell you they won't re-elect you. It can be hard. Many people didn't like me because I was independent and I was a woman saying 'No'.

As a woman you have to work three times as hard, but women like Dina and Edna Molewa (now minister of Water and Environmental Affairs) supported me. These women were my backbone.

What did the union movement give you?

It gave me everything. It made me what I am. It gave me confidence and skills like when I was a representative to the ICFTU (International Confederation of Free Trade Unions). Saccawu, Cosatu, is my life and it is my home. **LB**

Rantsolase was Cosatu treasurer until 2009, when she went to parliament as an ANC MP.

She served as chair of the Disciplinary Committee in the ANC Vaal Region, was chair of the Human Rights Committee and a member of the Nedlac Executive Committee and Presidential Working Group from 1999 to 2009.

She represented workers on the ILO Committee of Labour Standards, the SA Development Community (SADC) Labour and Social Commission and the African Union's Labour and Social Commission from 2003 to 2009.