

Wilton Mkwayi speaks again - after 25 years

WILTON MKWAYI was released from prison in October this year after serving 25 years of a life sentence. He was a trade unionist, an ANC leader and a commander of Umkhonto we Sizwe before his arrest in 1964. He spoke to the *Labour Bulletin* in Soweto.

I first joined the African National Congress in 1940. I was 17 years old and so I was still short of a year to be allowed to be a full member of ANC, according to the constitution, but fathers joined for their boys who were 16 or 17 or so. Our fathers were angry, because they were forced to move from the area where they were, and because of that, the ANC found good ground for organising. But it was only later on in '46 in PE, that I had a feeling of really belonging to the ANC because I was active in bus boycotts, rent boycotts and so on.

I first started working at Saldhana Bay during the war, where they were building houses for soldiers. But I left because there was no water in the place. Water was brought once a week

by ship from Cape Town. So I left and came back to Somerset West dynamite factory. There I was working as a sort of clerk. But I soon left to go home because my mother had died in that duration. I didn't know she was late for a year because nobody at home could write to me about it. Somebody I was working with went home taking things and he wrote back to say she is late. So I went home and didn't return to Somerset West.

Then I worked in PE for the railways as a stevedore. What I must make plain is that while working there, we didn't really know properly what a union was. So we joined the staff association and attended meetings, but with no understanding about what we were doing. But later on I



Wilton Mkwayi speaking after his release

Photo: Labour Bulletin

met two men who told me and others about trade unions. That was the late Gladstone Tshume and Raymond Mhlaba. They were the ones who groomed me on reading in English and on trade unions. Although they were known communists, they never recruited me.

Tshume and Mhlaba were communists in the ANC. They were the ones who were trusted by the people in general, because the people would say that if you are having a problem, they have got time to sit down and help you with your problem. They are the ones who visit you at home to see that your problem is solved. We tried to copy them, by the way. And that is how we got to know the people.

Shopsteward at Metal Box

After working for the railways as a stevedore, I worked at Metal Box tin factory in Port Elizabeth. This was now 1950. There I joined a trade union. I was shopsteward and chairman of the executive and it went smoothly for some time. But we had problems because management did not want us as shopstewards collecting funds inside the factory. So as soon as we knocked off, while others were still having showers there, we rushed to the gate to collect. But we often found the municipal police there. You needed a permit to collect. They said that it was a public street in front of the gate. But management

didn't want us to stand at the gate, we must be outside.

This problem resulted in us doing something that I am still not sure was right. Once there was a funeral. We organised workers to attend that funeral. And they found that having come for a funeral, they were asked there for their subscriptions. We were there collecting for the trade union.

And when we look at those problems and we look at today's situation, you find that today that is not the case. Shopstewards are recognised by most firms or companies, let me not say all. It seems in most there are shopstewards who take up issues. In our case, we found that only when management saw there was going to be a strike, they would allow shopstewards to discuss, but after that those shopstewards would be dismissed one by one. The slogan of 'an injury to one is an injury to all' wasn't used in those days, in that there were no sympathy strikes by other workers when there was a strike in one of the factories.

In 1952, there was a strike and I was arrested and sentenced even though I was on night-shift and didn't even know about the strike at first. And so I was out of that job. I became an organiser of the tin workers union, but only for a short duration because Tshume was banned at the end of '52. At the time, he was the secretary of African Textiles Workers Industrial Union. So in '53, I became organising secretary of African Textiles in the PE and Uitenhage branch. This I did until 1960 when I left SA during the State of Emergency.

SACTU

In '56, of course, I was arrested with others in the Treason Trial, but when going home during recesses, I continued organising. And even though Tshume was banned, I used to go to him for help because it was still difficult for me to reply to letters from employers and so on. And he would draft everything for me.

During the formation of SACTU, I was there representing Textiles. SACTU was formed because in 1953, there was this Native Labour Settlement of Disputes Act. This now brought the angle of saying that unions should be divided completely. There must be a white union in the textile industry, a second one that's coloured and Indians and these would be registered, and then an unregistered one for Africans. We as Africans were also not allowed to negotiate on wages and so on.

After SACTU was formed, I became Treasurer for the Eastern Cape region. I have seen a newspaper which says that I was the National Treasurer of SACTU, but in fact I was treasurer only for the Eastern Cape region until I left the country in 1960.

Things then were not like you find today. Unions have lots of funds today and unionists are getting paid. But for us as secretaries and organisers, maybe we were told we were getting R30 a month. But if we got a straight R30 for 3 months in a year, that year was a good year for us. In other words we were not paid.

SACTU used to run night classes to

teach people, especially about trade unions. This was done with the help of the Communist Party and others. You find that most people who were loyal attenders were squatters, people who come from rural areas, because there was also an element of general learning being taught through these classes. They found there were willing people, specially whites who would teach some of them how to write.



Wild with happiness

You don't know how people feel after a short duration of some 6 months or just a little more, having not much problem in writing their own language, that is Xhosa or whatever. You don't know how it feels when they write home and then they receive a letter saying 'we did this and this'. People would go wild with happiness that their families at home have read all they have written themselves when they could not write before.

Many of these rural people who started because they wanted to learn to read and write, became staunch members of their trade unions. With the result that in the 50s, especially from '56, the ANC attempted to get people from the Ciskei and the Transkei to organise the unemployed from home so that when there are strikes in town, they must not rush there to scab by replacing striking workers.

I was also the treasurer of the ANC New Brighton branch and the Eastern

Cape region, but not of the province, until I left. And I was the volunteer-in-chief for the New Brighton branch and Eastern Cape region. This was first for the defiance campaign in 1952, but we kept volunteers after that too. We had them doing organisational work until the

ANC was banned in April 1960.

When the SOE was first declared, the treason trial was still going and they wanted to arrest all of us who were on trial. But I escaped. Then, because we had been wanting to send somebody to the formation of the All African Trade Union Federation and most people couldn't get passports, it was decided I must leave with Moses Mabhida and go there and represent SACTU. We also represented SACTU in consultations with the World Federation of Trade Unions. SACTU was affiliated to the WFTU.

Travels to socialist countries

During that time we travelled to the socialist countries - China, the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia - and saw a lot of things you don't see in South Africa. We visited factories and saw the social services offered to the working people. For example, there were creches in the factories for the children of workers, something we are not used to in South Africa. There was maternity leave for mothers and when they had had their children and came back to the factory, they were allowed an hour off each day to see their child-

ren. Also there were many cases where women were in very high positions, in charge of whole factories. There was one young woman - she said she was old already, she was 26 - she was in charge of a workforce of about 25 000 people on each shift. This was in the Soviet Union. I don't know if such things can happen here, our people are very traditional in the question of women.

Umkhonto we Sizwe

Well, while I was away, it was decided to form Umkhonto we Sizwe and so I went for training. We used to say when organising people, that you cannot be a good trade unionist if you do not belong to the ANC, and as a worker, you cannot be a good ANC member if you do not belong to a trade union. So there was a link there. So I was an ANC person and it was the ANC which decided to embark on armed struggle.

After training, I returned to South Africa and went to stay at Rivonia. I was lucky again because when people were arrested there, I managed to escape. I then became commander-in-chief of MK, because the other comrades were in jail. But unfortunately, I was also caught eventually and sentenced to life imprisonment.

Unions stronger than ever

In our first years in jail, we didn't hear much about developments at first. In fact, it took some time before we knew about the strikes in Durban

in 1973 when trade unions started to come up again. But we did begin to hear more in later years and we were proud, very proud indeed, of what was happening. The trade unions have become stronger than they have ever been before. Most especially, we are happy to see the strength of the mine-workers because that is something that we could not build in our days.

Now that COSATU has been formed, the question arises as to what role SACTU should play. This is a question which must be addressed by the democratic movement as a whole.

I want to say also that it is exciting to see the development of the ANC, how it has gained strength here and overseas. Such advances make us very happy as members of the ANC. But the ANC must be allowed to operate openly. We cannot talk of negotiations if our organisation is banned. That is even what we said in 1960.

It must be clear that the ANC never wanted violence. We wanted to negotiate. No-one is going to get up on a platform and call for violence if there is open political activity. But the government did not want to negotiate, and so they continued to arrest people and to ban our organisations. So the decision to start the armed struggle, after 50 years of trying to negotiate, was to push the government to come to the table quickly and negotiate. Nobody wanted violence because through violence you will end up dead and dead people cannot negotiate. But we were wrong. They did not agree to negotiate and so the armed struggle continued for much longer than we ex-

pected and it continues today and will continue until negotiation happens.

But I am still not sure if the government is serious about change and negotiation. I think it may still take a long time. And it is no use to say to Mkwai or to Sisulu, you must come and talk to us. We cannot talk to anyone as Mkwai or Sisulu, we are members of the ANC and if the ANC says we must talk, then we will do it. But for now this will not happen because our organisation is still not free.

But there are some things that did not make us happy. For example, I think that the youth got too wild when they went around burning people. We were not happy about that. If a person thinks differently to you, you do not go and burn that person. You must try to talk to them. If your neighbour belongs to a different organisation, then you go to your meeting, and he goes to his and then you come back and have coffee together.

But we see situations now where neighbours won't even go to the funeral of the person who lived next door because of different politics. Now that is not our culture. So I think unity is very important. COSATU and NACTU must talk to each other, they must invite each other to their meetings, we must see real unity in our struggle. That is one thing we were unhappy about when COSATU was formed, that NACTU did not come in.

There is also another question about the youth and about those who are at school. The other day, some school students from Pretoria came to greet me. I asked them why they came

to see me and they said it was because I was a commander of Umkhonto.

Education is the spear and the shield

So I said to them, okay, then I will give you a command. I said to them I will give them a spear and a shield. The spear is education. The shield is education. My command is that they should go back to school and study. They are the leaders of the future and they can only be leaders if they have an education. I am very unhappy to see children roaming the streets when they should be in school learning.

The *Labour Bulletin* is good work, it is educating the workers and the people. I think it is good that the *Bulletin* is trying to get to the workers, that it is not just for intellectuals at universities. But it must be next to the workers and not controlled by them. While there is COSATU, there is also NACTU, independent unions who are not affiliated with any side at the moment. And the *Bulletin* should cover all. Now once it is kept next to the workers, but not controlled by them, it is easy to do that. It must cover everything that is happening on the ground.

To those who read the *Bulletin* and to workers as a whole, I want to say they must continue to read it, they must increase the numbers that are sold. If something is said in the *Bulletin* which they do not like or do not agree with, then they must criticise and they must contribute. But most importantly, they must educate themselves. ☆