

# *Working class and proud*

**I** was born in 1964 in the Cape Town suburb of Factreton to a working class family. My mother worked in Rex Trueform and my father was a construction worker. I schooled in Factreton. My mother still lives there. I am proud to say that I am working class.

My father was my inspiration. Although he was working class, he was well read. He would read the newspaper from cover to cover, and he would encourage us to read.

## **Developing a consciousness**

During my high school years, my sister and I joined the Muslim Students Association. That was where my involvement started and I became politically conscious.

One specific incident brought about my consciousness: I remember the day clearly. It was the time Imam Haroon was killed. He was a township community worker whom the security police murdered. My parents had grown up in the same area as the Imam. My father instilled in us that you do not just accept things. He would tell us "Look at a situation, assess it and decide if it is right or wrong".

I grew up in a council house with five sisters and a brother. The house was small so whenever there were political discussions, we could hear and would sometimes join in. For example, my parents had a friend, Souda Barden. We heard when her husband was placed under house arrest for defying the

*Rugaya Rees and William  
Mallala profile Sharmila  
Garnie, SASBO shopsteward at  
First National Bank (FNB).*

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government. He owned a taxi, and refused to transport only whites.

## **Starting in banking**

When I left school in standard eight [grade 10], I worked for an alarm company. As a clerk, I earned R45 per week. Not long after that, I got a job at the Perm in Cape Town. That was my first experience of banking. Later I moved to Zimbabwe where I joined a women's organisation and met my husband. I then returned to Cape Town and started working for ABSA. At ABSA, I was told that I had to make a choice between my career and my union activities. So I left and joined FNB in 1995.

## **Joining SASBO**

At ABSA, I became a member of the Financial Institution Workers Union (FIWU). In 1993, FIWU merged with SASBO. The merger was followed by discussions on affiliating to COSATU.

The financial industry and the union were predominantly white. We managed to turn the SASBO executive committee in Cape Town from majority white to

majority black. The leaders called the new committee members communists. They accused us of trying to take over the union and of pursuing our own interests and not those of the workers.

Later a commission of enquiry was set up. The leaders wanted to expel us and replace us with conservative people. They used apartheid tactics to vote us out at the annual general meeting. However, they failed because a huge number of SASBO members came to support us.

The union's Cape Town committee was very radical. This was because a lot of us were involved in the struggle against apartheid, and came from the working class. Being on the ground with the people, we understood the issues.

### **My victory**

The victory for me was to stand up at SASBO's second congress and say "Up to here and no further. You must decide whether you want us, as black workers, in. If not, we will walk out now and take our black membership with us." This made them realise there were problems in the union that needed to be addressed.

### **Problems with SASBO**

The union focuses on wage negotiations primarily. It needs to address other issues as well, such as employment equity. I sometimes get the impression that the union is not interested in bread-and-butter issues.

I speak from the ground because that is where I am - with those on the ground. People feel that SASBO does not address their real problems. I don't think SASBO is very popular. Go into a meeting and you will hear workers asking, "What does SASBO do for us?" We pay R30 per month, but we do not see anything that they do. Just look at the issue of retrenchments and the way SASBO handled it. People were very unhappy.

The union must jack itself up or it will die a slow death. Personally, I have ploughed a lot into that union. I often challenged the former general secretary on the union's structures.

Working in the union is very challenging. The people are very conservative. To get them to understand worker and shopsteward issues is difficult. The challenge is to stand up to them and hold them accountable.

### **Affiliating to COSATU**

The general secretary never actively encourages members to take part in COSATU campaigns. When we challenge him on that, he says that it is up to the members. It almost feels as if we are not part of the federation. Until today, I cannot understand why COSATU still leaves SASBO unchallenged. I think COSATU first wanted SASBO in its fold and then tried to change SASBO from within.

### **HIV/AIDS**

At Bank City, FNB has an HIV/AIDS education programme and a clinic that provides health care. According to FNB's HIV policy, you cannot discriminate against those who are infected with the disease. The bank also does not require one to go for an HIV test.

I knew someone who worked with me in Cape Town. She was bright and vibrant. When she fell pregnant, she found out that she and the baby were HIV positive. The baby died first and then she died. I felt incredibly sad. It has taken some time for me to come to terms with it. I guess when it is a friend and a colleague, it's even worse.

I feel that HIV is aggravated by circumstances that people have to live under. They don't have adequate facilities for health care. Malnutrition adds to the burden of carrying that virus. It makes it easier for opportunistic infections like





tuberculosis and pneumonia to breed and live. I appeal to people to educate themselves on this disease.

### **Family life**

My husband understands my work and gives me his full support. At first, it was difficult but we compromise. When I have meetings, my husband looks after the children and I support him in what he does.

My children are very aware of my involvement with the union. I also ensure they look at people's good qualities, and not at the colour of their skin or whether they have long hair. Ideally, I don't want them to have any prejudices.

My dad – Moosa is his name – had so much to offer his kids. Just as he told me to read, I try hard to get my kids to read, but the television is such a dominant feature.

### **Cape Town**

As a Capetonian, I want to say that in our own communities and families, you still find racism. Nothing much has changed in Cape Town. In the areas we live, Cape Town

consists of only white and coloured people. There does not seem to be room for anyone else. Some Capetonians do not see our darker skinned brothers and sisters as on the same level as them. I do not think much integration has taken place.

If you ask a coloured person in Cape Town who their ancestors are, that person will tell you about German and Scottish grandparents. However, they cannot answer you when you ask them where they come from as a coloured. I cannot understand why we should feel ashamed of who we are. I see myself as an African.

### **Message to the women**

This is a special request to the Muslim women: Go back and read what the Prophet said about women. Don't just accept what is told to you. Assess it for yourself and educate yourself. The first word that was said was *Iqra*, which means *read* in Arabic. So read and you will know and understand your rightful place in your home and your society.

Comrade Oliver Tambo said: "If you teach a woman you teach a nation". ★