

Working together, supporting each other

Lorna: I started to work for the National Union of Textile Workers (NUTW) in 1985, but the relationship with the union started in 1981. I was employed by a company called Patons & Baldwins. There were a lot of disturbing things happening at Patons & Baldwins which needed to be challenged. The male supervisor used to go into the women's toilet, kick the door open, and drag people out of the toilet. He said he did this because some people would loaf in the toilets, and others would fall asleep.

We wanted a better union. The company's union was only interested in funeral benefits. One day I read about FOSATU in the newspaper. My shift started at 2pm, and my sister's shift ended at the same time. She said to me that they wanted me to organise the workers, and that there was a white man at the gate who was handing out papers to the workers.

This white man was Halton Cheadle - he was the one organising for FOSATU. FOSATU represented us properly - they did not discuss funeral benefits. But I must say that it was risky for Halton to be seen in the location.

Because FOSATU represented us properly, this motivated the people. Halton told me that Paton & Baldwins was a British company and that it understood the need for workers to be unionised. The task of getting workers to join the union

Husband and wife, Similo Makambi (a councillor with the Eastern Metropolitan Local Council) and Lorna Motsoahae (a local administrator for CEPPWAWU) speak to Rugaya Rees and Lisa Vorwerk.

was left to me. I had an advantage - my machine was in the passage so when workers went to the toilets they had to pass me. That's when I gave them the forms. Some of them would even fill the forms in whilst in the toilet.

I remember the first year - racial restrictions was all very much in place. Halton organised a trip for us and we all squeezed into his little car. We asked Halton what he would do if the police stopped him. He laughed and said he would tell them that we were his farmworkers.

Working for the union

I had a problematic pregnancy and while I was on sick leave the company closed down. I was aware that they were going to close down as I was involved in the meetings from time to time. These

meetings were very one sided – only management gave the orders and demanded this and that. We were not allowed to put our demands forward.

In late 1984 I was offered a job in the union and went to work for NUTW. I didn't know how to answer a phone or how to type – in fact I was afraid of the phones. But what I know today I learnt at the union office.

I was lucky to work with people who wanted to see the betterment of others and who believed in education. One day Rob Le Grange gave me some stuff to photocopy for a meeting. I did not know what minutes were – this was very foreign to me and I mixed up all the pages. That day Rob taught me how to do things in sequence and what minutes were.

Women comrades

Women are still viewed as people whose job are not important. Women are mostly given administrative tasks like answering the telephone. So I would say no, we women trade unionists are not taken seriously by the male counterparts.

But I want to say this: women should try and work themselves up the ladder and make their voices heard. Women should be given jobs because they can do the job and on merit, not because someone wants her there out of nepotism. Women must not depend on the quota system to take them up the ladder.

Women's achievements

We as women have achieved a lot. For example, the laws are now more friendly towards women. However, I want to make an example of myself. I had very little schooling and due to lack of funds I could only go to standard 7.

I had my first baby at the tender age of 19 years and was living with my family. However, they could not afford to keep us

all going and I went to look for work. My first job was as a domestic. But I kept myself going by reading everything I could lay my hands on. I worked hard for where I am today. Domestic workers must strive for education if they want to be totally emancipated.

Struggle

I want to tell you very briefly about my life as a cadre of our struggle. My struggles were not just for the trade union. I was active in the structures of the UDF (United Democratic Front) in Randfontein. This was where I took refuge with Similo after the leadership was swept up by the police. I did not sit back. I continued recruiting people and continued to hand out my forms to others. After the UDF leadership was arrested, my house was watched. My family was harassed because of my UDF activities. So I moved on, but could never stay in one place for long. I was constantly on the move. In 1988 Similo came to work for PPWAWU and we started our relationship again.

Supporting each other

Similo: 'I personally do not see much wrong in working together. We worked together when we were in PPWAWU. We respected each other, even if there were arguments.

I regard it as very lucky that we were able to spend our lives in the trade union movement as we are both activists. I want to place a huge emphasis on respect. We must respect the will of others and learn to be patient.

If you don't understand the work your spouse is involved in, do yourself a favour and learn about it. I am not saying that supporting my wife in the union is easy, but mutual respect definitely helps.

I must admit that Lorna does 80% of the workload at home and I respect and



admire her for this. I must be honest and say that if I had taken just 50% of the workload, I don't know what would have happened.

Leaders leaving labour

I have always maintained that leaders are *not born but are developed by the process of struggle*. Therefore who comes and goes is immaterial to me.

The struggle will always continue and produce leadership in its various stages of unfolding.

Message for workers

I believe workers all over could be the most organised sector of a society. When they are organised they can begin to implement all the things they want to achieve. The trade union movement started at a difficult time. But now the environment is well suited to organise and develop unorganised workers.'

On wishes

Lorna: 'Let us stand together and eradicate illiteracy and poverty. The tools are there so let's use them.

For my hopes and wishes for this millennium - I am passionate about domestic workers. I hope that government could do something for these domestics in the form of proper housing, especially when their 'madams' dismiss them, because not only will they lose a job but accommodation as well. COSATU should begin to address the needs of these people.'

Also COSATU never makes mention of the rank and file who held the organisation together in difficult times when leadership was detained and workers were sometimes despairing. I find this upsetting for administrators who were there in the early years of FOSATU. COSATU must remember the rank and file and the difficult times we had! ★