

"I believe in practical action and hate people who will theorise about our problems and not implement what they themselves have proposed or suggested."

ZWELINZIMA VAVI, COSATU's organising secretary, talks to Snuki Zikalala

The identity document I carry states that I was born on 20 December 1962 in a farm in Hanover which is not far from De Aar. I doubt the validity of that date since my parents were not educated and there was no registration of deaths and births in the farms. I am the tenth member in a family of twelve.

I started my primary schooling on the farm until we were forced to move to Sada, not far from Queenstown, where I completed matric at Mhlotshane high school in 1983.

### Starting work and union activity

In 1984, I was employed at the Vaal Reefs South mine as a clerk at a uranium plant and within a month I became a member of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). I was elected as a shopsteward in early 1985, later became branch secretary. In 1986 I was elected as the chairperson of the COSATU local in Klerksdorp.

In those days life was not that easy for the mine workers. NUM had just started organising and workers were still afraid to associate themselves with any union. As a shopsteward, I was loaded with the task of teaching workers the ABC's of a trade union. We had to destroy the established structures in the mines - the indunas and tribal representatives and replace them with union structures. There was a lot of resistance from those who had power, but history was on our side.

One thing that impressed me and is lacking these days, is the warmth that one got from the workers. They were very courageous and were prepared to risk their lives for their ideals. The mandate one got from them was always backed by action.

### 1987 strike and dismissals

The NUM annual congress, in February 1987, injected a new spirit of defiance in us. Working from the congress resolutions, we intensified our organisational base at the Vaal Reef mines. We strengthened our structures and prepared ourselves for unprecedented strike action if need be.

Negotiations for a decent wage started early and workers prepared for action in event of a deadlock. Before the actual strike, workers were mobilised to reject the single-sex hostel system. As a shopsteward and chair of the local, I was co-ordinating everything that was taking place. It was tiring but challenging.

Workers at Vaal Reef mine together with all NUM members took a decision for strike action, and on 9 August 1987 we downed tools. Management used brutal force to suppress the industrial action. Our offices in Klerksdorp were raided and I was arrested together with other leaders of NUM. Security police patrolled hostels and searched our rooms looking for NUM's shopstewards. It was frightening but exciting.

The strike ended with 20 000 workers from

the Vaal Reefs mine dismissed, and I was one of them.

### **Re-organising NUM**

After the 1987 dismissals, I became NUM organiser. This was a mammoth task. The union was almost destroyed. Shopstewards who were the backbone of the union were the first to leave the mines. The union was left without leadership. We had to build the union and train new shopstewards from the start.

It was our responsibility to ensure that every dismissed worker got his package and that pensions were paid. The NUM office in Klerksdorp was always packed with workers who wanted to know their fate. It was painful to see workers accepting "defeat" with pride. Re-building union structures in a hostile environment was not child's play. Management adopted a hardline attitude and threatened workers with dismissals if they got involved with the union.

My collective which included Jesse Maluleka, Solomon Rasman and Percy Djonase worked tirelessly to re-build NUM structures. We encountered a number of problems. Workers were demoralised and afraid to be elected as shopstewards.

In some mines, like Vaal Reefs East and West, I was known as Simpiwe Nanise as management would not allow me to enter their premises or to negotiate on behalf of the workers.

By the end of 1988, we had managed to establish the missing structures.

### **From NUM to COSATU**

In 1988, I was elected as the regional secretary of COSATU in the Western Transvaal. I was reluctant to accept the position because I did not want to lose touch with my constituency. I had already lost touch with the workers since my dismissal.

When I arrived in the Vaal, I found that the affiliates were very weak. The biggest unions, NUMSA, NUM and SACCAWU were organising in that area, but they were not co-ordinating their activities. The administration of Western Transvaal region was in chaos.

I re-organised COSATU structures and

encouraged smaller unions to challenge, in a comradely spirit, big unions like NUMSA and NUM. We revamped the local and made sure that all affiliates were involved in practical action.

Politically, the Vaal was completely dead. We initiated the re-launching of the Civic Association, youth organisation, and involved the community in politics of protests.

### **Weaknesses of COSATU**

In 1992, I was appointed COSATU's national organising secretary. My task is to build strong structures of the federation. The main problem in COSATU is that there are no solidarity strikes. COSATU was basically formed to co-ordinate action and give support to weaker unions and this is not always happening. Unions don't give moral or material support to those sectors which are on strike. This is a fundamental weakness.

Early last year, there was a discussion in COSATU about the role of the REC in the Central Executive Committee (CEC) meetings. A strong feeling was that REC members should have the right to vote in the CEC meetings since they are the ones directly in touch with the membership in their regions. Presently, workers are bound by COSATU's policy which states that regions can participate in CEC meetings, but have no voting rights.

My view is that without strong regional structures, without the regions having considerable influence in the CEC, workers will always complain about lack of democracy within COSATU. They will always feel that they are there just to implement decisions of the CEC.

My experience is that a decision which has been motivated by regions will always be carried out, to the letter. Workers will feel obliged, and happy, to implement their own decisions.

What will strengthen COSATU at this crucial and challenging time is the full participation of shopstewards in locals. Locals must at all times discuss issues which affect them as unions.

### **Reputation of being a "hardliner"**

Brought up on a farm, at a tender age I was forced to help my parents who were working

like slaves for a boer. Also, as a miner, I was involved in the labour movement during the darkest times of our struggle. The 1987 strike, the building of NUM after that, and the Vaal Triangle situation hardened me and made me not to compromise on obvious issues. I am sure that is why some people label me a "hardliner."

I believe in practical action and hate people who will theorise about our problems and not implement what they themselves have proposed or suggested.

While I was COSATU regional secretary in the Western Transvaal, I always emphasised the importance of building a strong organisation. Strength comes from the people. They themselves must defend their lives and gains. The attitude we adopted in the Vaal triangle was that for every death caused by the vigilantes or the security forces, we have to respond organisationally; organising stayaways, consumer boycotts or marches.

### **Trade unions and political parties**

A trade union movement should always maintain its independence. The dangers that we have to guard against are the mixing up of political and economic issues.

We must be able to draw a line between political and economic demands. Workers must always defend and fight for their rights at plant level, and when they are out of the plant must continue their militancy in the structures of the civil society.

The end of apartheid is not an end to exploitation and bourgeois rule. It will be the beginning and the intensification of the class struggle.

### **Wearing of two hats**

The crisis that we are facing as union leaders is that we wear many hats. Because of the nature of our struggle, and the experience that our internal leaders have, trade union leaders find themselves being involved in executive positions of COSATU, ANC, SACP and in civics. My opinion is that no individual can be effective if he is involved in more than one structure.

I have always emphasised that people should wear one hat whenever possible. If you



Photo: William Matlala

have decided to be a trade unionist you must do your utmost in the workers' struggle. You must be innovative and be up to date with issues that are worker related.

A trade union movement should not allow itself to be led by a political or a "vanguard party." We should always fight for our independence and not allow ourselves to be controlled by a political party.

The strategic alliance we have formed with the ANC and the SACP will end when we achieve democracy in South Africa. I am not for the idea of an alliance after we have achieved our goal.

### **Family and work**

I am married and we don't have children as yet. I have encouraged my spouse to take up education seriously. She is now doing her 'O' levels. As a trade unionist it is very difficult to be at home. The only time we spend together in peace is when I am on holiday and we usually go to my township Sada.

I was once an ardent lover of boxing and was nearly a champ during my days. I still love watching boxing and soccer if I have time. My favourite team is Kaizer Chiefs. ☆