

Showing the way for women in the unions

Morice Smithers interviews ELIZABETH THABETHE, senior shopsteward, Transvaal branch treasurer, branch co-ordinator of the Womens' Group, and member of the CWIU NEC

I was born in 1959 in Katlehong - at that time there were just shacks there, before they built these four roomed matchboxes. My parents were originally from near Swaziland, but they worked in Edenvale. My father worked in a factory and was a supervisor representing the workers on the liaison committee. My mother was a domestic worker, earning very little, but trying her utmost best to help my father to provide for five daughters.

I schooled here in Katlehong. In 1978, after the uprising which started in 1976, we couldn't write exams. Also, because I am from a poor family - we were especially poor once my mother stopped working - I was forced to leave school and lose any chance of going to university. I started to work in 1978 and I am still at the same firm although I left for a short while in 1982, because I could get more pay and better conditions at another company. But then they moved to Bophutatswana, partly to escape from the union, which was well-organised there in the company.

I first joined the union in 1984. There were difficulties in organising because there were people who had been working there for many years who were scared to challenge management. Workers were badly treated, and anyone who com-

plained about things would be told that there were plenty of people outside who wanted their job.

We start to organise

There was a comrade from SFAWU, a woman, who helped to organise us. She explained the struggles they had been waging at Simba. They finally got recognition and she was now a shopsteward. So she began to talk to the workers in the factory - and most decided to join. The comrade from SFAWU arranged that an organiser from Chemical - Bra Wes - would meet us. We all went out at lunchtime as if we were going to eat and met them in a nearby shop where they had union forms for us to apply.

Of course, we had to keep our membership quiet at first, especially from the supervisors who worked hand-in-hand with management. They used to sit with management and decide who should get increases. So if you were not in good relations with the supervisors, then they would say you don't deserve increases or promotions.

Sometimes if they motivated an increase for you, however small, they would come to you and say you must not tell the other workers you were now getting more money. This was one way that they used to try and divide the workers.

Sexual harassment

There were also those who would say 'the job is there in the factory, but you know there's nothing for mahala, so can't you be my girlfriend'. And then if the relationship ended, you could expect to be expelled from the job.

So we became members of the union and succeeded in getting 50% plus one to join. At first management refused to recognise the union, especially when the union asked for time off for shopsteward elections and for shopstewards to be able to meet and to have facilities like telephones for union work. They said the company was there for business, not to look after the union. But finally they had to agree.

Workers didn't really understand exactly what or who the union was. They thought that you join a union and it does things for you. So Wesley came and spoke to them and explained that the union is not the officials or the offices, but the workers themselves. He explained that if we were united, we would make gains. If we were not, we would not get anywhere.

We had elections and I was elected as the senior shopsteward. Things were very difficult in the beginning for us. There was a time in 1986 when all the other shopstewards resigned because they were being pushed from the management side and the workers' side. They couldn't take the pressure and I was left alone in the committee. It wasn't easy for me especially because management didn't take women seriously and didn't see how they could be leaders. But eventually they began to respect me. Maybe I succeeded in the union as a woman because I came from a family where they were no sons and we had to learn to do things that men do, to help my father who was working hard to bring us up.

Of course, many of the male workers also had a negative attitude - they felt they could not be represented by a woman. Yet I was elected by men also because I came from a department in which men and women were working.

It was not easy for me as a woman, but I told myself that if I want to fight for my own people, I cannot be discouraged. I was given courage by the workers in our factory, especially the women, who saw my potential. I also made sure I attended locals where I began to understand more of the problems that workers generally were experiencing and to learn from some of the older shopstewards who were there.

As well as being senior shopsteward in my company I have also been elected as Transvaal

branch treasurer, branch co-ordinator of the Women's Group, and a member of the NEC.

Most unions have now accepted that women's structures need to exist within the unions. They no longer have the criticism that we will be undermining women's structures in the community. I think they have realised that women experience specific problems in the workplace which women's groups in the community cannot attend to, for example the question of maternity rights and sexual harassment.

Building confidence

We have found that some of the women are more open and prepared to talk when they attend the Women's Forum than when they participate in the BECs or in the congresses. They build confidence in the Women's Forum and then are able to attend and participate in other structures. They begin to understand why they are involved and that women can be leaders too. We have been able to develop women so that they have the qualities needed to be shopstewards and from there they are able to move to other positions.

This is especially important when it comes to negotiations. Most negotiators have been male and when they come to issues that affect women, like maternity rights, this is the first thing that is compromised. There is no-one there who really knows all the difficulties that women experience. We can't allow issues that are important to women to be compromised just so that we can maybe get a little more money.

I foresee some problems for women in a post-apartheid SA. We are going to have to work hard now already for more participation. We have to make sure that women's rights are properly enshrined in a new constitution. For example, in the first draft of a Workers' Charter, there was only one sentence for women and we in the COSATU sub-committee argued that one sentence cannot cover all the issues that are important to women.

We have to look also at the fact that even in the unions that have a majority of women members, the leadership is still dominated by men. COSATU is trying to amend the constitution to introduce affirmative action and at the congress in July they are proposing from the EXCO that there should be seats reserved in some leadership structures for comrade women. Such a suggestion has been accepted whole-heartedly by women, but we must look at how this can be done. We believe it will boost the role of women in COSATU significantly. But we believe there

must be action on these things, not just resolutions on paper.

One of the problems facing unions is that meetings are not running as they were before the political organisations were unbanned. Many meetings are not even quorate. The question of the labour movement is seen to have been flattened. Many workers, including shopstewards, are involved in the civics and other political organisations and that takes time. So there is a decline in COSATU and that is being discussed with some urgency. In the end it is workers on the factory floor who are going to suffer.

The unions must remain strong!

We must try to get a balance between the political organisations and the union movement. My own belief is that the labour movement played a key role in getting organisations unbanned. We were also strong enough to get the Labour Relations Amendment Act scrapped. We cannot afford to lose the strength that we had. We fought very strong to get there.

In CWIU we have a resolution for rebuilding structures from the shopfloor upwards. We see that if workers relax now, then their own rights are not going to be enshrined in the constitution or in any future Bill of Rights. We have to continue struggling until we see that our rights are secured.

Our economy is in tatters. COSATU has an economic body which is trying to look at what can be done in order to ensure that the economy is as it should be. It's going to be tough, so we have to start working on it now. The most difficult thing is going to be to try and provide the fruits of the struggle for people from the mess that the racists have left.

The question of what kind of economy we will have is still very much under debate. You know, all of us were gunning for socialism, though now it has been proved wrong in some parts of the world. Due to these mistakes, people throughout COSATU are looking at different economic options, keeping mind the need for an economy which will favour workers.

I'm not sure that a post-apartheid SA is going to be how we envisage it to be. Most people believe that the ANC will take over and that will be the end of all our problems. But an ANC government, or any other government, will represent all South Africans. Therefore I think unions must remain independent in order to be guided by the policies and principles of the labour movement, and make sure the specific interests of workers are catered for.



Working a triple shift

As a single mother, I would like to be able to spend more time with my child but I am always very busy with meetings and other responsibilities. Today for example I have three meetings in addition to this interview. I even have my bag with me because I am only going home tomorrow as a result of these meetings. Fortunately my sisters and my aunt help me with my child so she does not suffer when I am away.

So I work a triple shift - my job in the factory, my duties at home, and my union work. But I must continue because there is still a lot of work to be done in the unions, and I cannot foresee when this will change. It will only become easier if more comrades get involved and share the load.

Because of my involvements, I don't think I will marry soon. I would be expected to do all sorts of things as a 'makoti' and I am not keen on that. I also don't believe that I must be controlled in the way that traditions demand, having to abide by the rules of the man who society says is the head of the family. Fortunately my boyfriend is very co-operative - he believes in freedom of association and does not try to control me and my movements. I think I used my negotiating skills on him to persuade him. Anyway, maybe post-apartheid I will think about settling down. But not now. ☆