

Profile

Interview with Mtutuzeli Tom, Mercedes Benz shopsteward, vice-chair of COSATU's Eastern Cape region

I was born in East London. When I was still young, we moved to Mdantsane. At that time, we were excited about moving, not knowing it was part of the forced removals programme, and we didn't know that it would mean that we would become part of a so-called independent homeland.

I first discovered politics at school. There were Black Consciousness slogans which we supported, but without a clear understanding of what they meant - for example, Azania and the black power salute. We just understood it means we have to be united, that Azania is going to be a free SA. There didn't seem to be a plan to build people politically - it was just a question of taking us to war, to resist, to forms of action. There were some old people who were members of the ANC many years ago who used to sit down with us and tell us about the old days. They also gave us examples of the resistance of the people from 1973, the workers in Natal and how they embarked on forms of strikes and other such histories. But they said we should be part of BC organisations and support them.

COSAS

After the banning of the BC organisations in 1977, there was that period of silence. People were scared - if you saluted someone by showing the fist, the person wouldn't respond, but would just look the other way. Everybody was afraid to do anything like the black power salute, because the police were taking you for that.

So people at school were not eager to openly begin establishing structures, to such an extent that we had to organise the Congress of South African Students (COSAS) in a semi-clandestine fashion. Everyone was recruited on a one-to-one basis - we never had a chance to sit down in a group and discuss things with comrades.

But in 1980 everything broke loose. We stood up in our schools and said this is the right time now because even the coloured and Indian comrades were taking part in the school uprising of 1980. People started talking about COSAS openly now. People everywhere were also starting to say something about the ANC and it was clear that the ANC had a base in the area where we were.

The principals and the teachers were saying there was nothing we could achieve with COSAS. They were really demoralising us, putting pressure on us to stop this thing and go to the classes and listen to what they are saying. We just said they were the people who were bringing Bantu education to us. But it's different today. Today you find students and their teachers are doing things together.

1980 was the time that I really began to develop some political maturity. We said to ourselves that the ANC has been fighting for a long time, having been established as far as back as 1912. But here is Zimbabwe getting their freedom already. How can we still be waiting for our freedom when we have been fighting for so long, while they started their struggle after we have

long been involved in resistance? So we said as students let us take the lead, let us march, let us go forward now.

Ciskei embarked on their independence referendum in 1980. We were blocking people and telling them 'please don't vote'. They were arguing and saying 'look if we don't vote, our houses will be taken away from us and our pensions will also be taken away' and we were saying 'no, these are all traps'. But in the end, we got so-called independence.

Things changed in 1981. COSAS was crushed by the Ciskeian police. The police were very brutal. They used sjamboks, making sure when they hit you that they get your eye out. There was even talk around the township that the police are 'uprooting our eyes'. So students felt too threatened to be involved in action.

I left school in 1982 after matric and started working at Mercedes Benz in 1983. Immediately after I was employed, we talked about establishing a youth congress in our area. We said that with a youth congress, we in the township could belong to an organisation. We had support for this idea from the students, from the drop-outs from school, and even from the gangsters of our area.

The youth congress received a blessing because one of the most popular and respected comrades in the area, comrade Steve Tshwete was at the launch to speak to us. He really made an encouraging speech. It was the first time in our lives that we saw a strong veteran of the ANC who spent so many years in Robben Island. He encouraged us and said he felt in his blood that the country was going to be free, because we were starting to build these organisations. He said we must not forget that, when we build them, we must spread the voice of the ANC because that is what the ANC wants us to do. The East London Youth Congress (ELYCO) started that day with thousands joining.

Joining the union

At Mercedes Benz I found that there were two unions, SAAWU and NAAWU. I had thought there was only one union in the whole country and that was SAAWU and so I was organised into SAAWU as a new guy in the factory. But as time went on, we got information about NAAWU from a shop steward who also gave us documents on the unity talks for the establishment of COSATU, and we said, 'look, this union is involved in this thing, how can we not support such a union'. Also we saw it had a lot

of members and was well-established in all the auto factories of the country. So we took a decision to become members of NAAWU.

The youth congress also took up a campaign to support the establishment of industrial unions. We debated these things as well as the question of forming civics. We even took money from our funds to take us to the launch of COSATU in Durban. At the congress, we met comrade MJ Naidoo who died recently. Comrade MJ told us how the working class can seize power, how the working class can take control of the means of production. He is one of the comrades who I will never forget. He was so patient in explaining things to us. He gave us copies of Umsebenzi and other things to read. Then we came back and organised groups to discuss Umsebenzi and the African Communist. We were really strong after the launch of COSATU and we discussed how to build the union in the plant. We campaigned very strongly for workers to join.

We also continued to play a leading role in ELYCO. In that organisation there was lot of democracy. Before I even worked as a fully-fledged worker leader in the factory, I tasted democracy in the ELYCO. I learnt there that a debate was a debate, and if you discuss you are free to put your own voice. We had area and branch structures where we discussed issues and took proposals to the councils and to the congress itself.

In spite of the existence of the Ciskei police, we still organised, meeting at night and sometimes during the day on SA land beyond the railway line in the bushes. We would find hundreds of the youth in the bushes and the fields discussing politics. Not only the main youth were involved in this, the ordinary members were there too.

I was also developing on the side of the trade union movement. I was elected in 1985 to the position of the vice-chairperson of the branch and as a shopsteward in the plant. In 1986 I was elected as the COSATU local chairperson in the area. I was also an NEC member of NAAWU.

In 1986 I attended the COSATU regional congress in PE where the division in the trade union movement in the Eastern Cape was very strong. There were the MACWUSA comrades, the GWUSA comrades, the SAAWU comrades, they were a bloc in the COSATU congress. There was NAAWU, Chemical, Food and Canning, and Sweet Food, who were also a bloc. It was the first time I had seen comrades fighting

with one another in one organisation. I kept asking comrades, 'why do we respond to these comrades in this fashion?' Instead of attacking them and saying that comrades are out of order, and using 'point of correction' and all those things, we should explain our position and then comrades might understand our point of view. I believed that they are comrades and so we should argue with them constructively. I never really understood what the tension was all about.

I was also part and parcel of one of the historic meetings whereby the NEC's of the metal and auto unions came together for the first time. We were raising slogans like 'viva MICWU', 'viva NAAWU', 'viva MAWU', and so on. We had to explain to MICWU comrades why we were wearing t-shirts with 'socialism' on them and why we said 'viva' and why we called each other 'comrade'. We wanted to make them feel at home. It was a very fruitful meeting, everything was agreed by consensus, and we finalised the merger itself and set the dates for it. We went to the regions and elected delegates through our structures.

We in NAAWU were pushing for the adoption of the Freedom Charter in that congress and we faced strong opposition from former MAWU comrades who were saying we could not adopt it, as it is not a programme of the working class and all that. We were saying that it contained the minimum demands of the working class and we needed to adopt it. It was a very interesting debate.

We said that you cannot run away from the fact that we stay in the townships, we don't stay in the sky. We know how the masses feel about this. We know how the workers feel about the Freedom Charter. It's our document. Don't we demand the nationalisation of industry? Comrades said, 'yes we do'. Don't we demand that the people shall govern? 'Yes, we do comrades'. Well, then, why don't we adopt this Freedom Charter?

The most interesting congress was the one that took place in 1989. In that congress, we established that there is an understanding amongst the delegates of the organisation. There is an acceptance of our argument in the congress. It was not just accepted - it was argued through - but we always reached consensus in our discussions. What I liked in the congress was the level of debate, debating resolutions like political settlement, setting the preconditions and so on.



The manner in which we prepared ourselves for the congress was very good - resolutions were read to the workers in the factories and discussed in general meetings with workers before the Congress. A resolutions committee was established by us with workers from different factories in our area, workers who are not shop-stewards, sitting together and discussing what they want us to take as resolutions in the forthcoming congress. Resolutions were drafted and sent to the resolutions committee and these were compiled and sent back to the regions to find out which resolutions workers wanted amended. So we felt that worker control and worker democracy in our organisation.

If you could see the video of the congress, you'll see that it was not an easy congress. You'll hear how people were debating and that they were really reflecting the interests of the working class. Each and every speaker was speaking on mandates. You speak because you say that you have met with the workers and these are the workers feelings, so when you speak you are speaking with the voice of the workers. And you have that confidence that if one comrade is raising an issue opposing yours, you just go to the mike with the feeling that the workers back home are saying, 'I must say this in this manner'. So the discussion was very healthy. ☆