

## JJ Mabena: *trade unionist heading for parliament*

LABOUR BULLETIN visited JJ MABENA, COSATU regional secretary, and number two on the ANC list for the Eastern Transvaal parliament in his office in Embalenhle, Secunda

**I**n 1980 I was employed at Colgate Palmolive in Boksburg and within a month after being employed I was elected a shopsteward in the Chemical Workers Industrial Union (CWIU). At Colgate we were mobilising workers to fight for the recognition of the union.

### **CWIU and Sasol**

In 1983 CWIU targeted the Sasol plants in Secunda. I used to be in the committee that recruited the Sasol workers over the weekends. In 1984 I left Colgate to come and work full time to build CWIU in Secunda. The Sasol project was very important. The conditions at Sasol were very terrible. I remember one shopsteward, Max Mayekiso, coming in the evening saying that one supervisor told him that Sasol was his farm. You had plant management people with that mentality. In the Sasol Coal Mines workers were being beaten up by white workers underground.

We formed a steering committee of very young men and they increased recruitment until we reached 50% of the 6 000 workers at Sasol. At first the company was not prepared to recognise the shopstewards. We had very active shopstewards in our committee. They started challenging some

of these cases forcefully. We looked at the grievance procedures of the company and encouraged the interim shopstewards to go and assist other workers in terms of the grievances procedures.

In 1984 Sasol dismissed all the workers for participating in the November stayaway. It was about 11 in the morning, and workers were taken out and paid off. The police were

there, buses were hired and workers were forced out of the hostel. Thereafter there were negotiations, and the majority of the workers were taken back. It was a very difficult period, but we persevered.

Then in 1986 I was elected COSATU's regional secretary. The main task was to build COSATU structures especially locals, co-ordinate COSATU activities and facilitate solidarity among affiliates.

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### **Dark days of emergency**

I used to escape, I would not allow myself to be arrested. There was one night in June 1985 when I was taken to the veld by very very drunk policemen. They loaded their guns as we were going to the veld in the combi. They told me to say my last prayer. I did because they were drunk, and I thought that one of them was going to shoot me. I

was taken to the veld and was questioned. They were very worried about my involvement in the ANC. They were kicking me on my chest. At 3am they took me to the police station. There were about five white policemen and one black guy. The one sergeant kept on kicking me. Until he made one mistake. He wanted the black policeman to hit me, but when he was very drunk he pointed to both of us and said, you black people you want too much. After that this black guy refused to hit me.

Another time they surrounded the mines, but I managed to escape. They looked for me in the township. As they were looking for me I was somewhere in one of the mines, being shown around by some of the shopstewards. I slept in one of the shafts. They were looking for me heavily in the township. The following day I went to Tsakane, and then to Natal for some months.

Although one does not like to think about it, it is important for us to try and forget the past. One of the policemen who used to ask me whether I can swim, who was always promising to take me to the dam one night, was there at a peace meeting. I reminded him. But he was coming to a peace meeting, so how can you not accept and work for reconciliation? It is important for our children. We have to reconcile and encourage all of us to work for the prosperity of this region and the country.

But you cannot indemnify a person when you do not know what that person did. When you go to church to confess you have to say what you did. It is important for people to come out and say, I have done this.

### Early life

I was born at Brakpan old location in the East Rand in 1959, and I went to Kwa-Ndebele for my High School. When I came to the *Eastern Transvaal* I met my wife. She is an administrator for CWIU. We used to work in the same office until I became a COSATU secretary, but she is still working for CWIU. We have three children.

My family is staying in Tsakane – my

mother and my two sisters and two brothers. My father passed away in 1984. My mother was a domestic servant and my father spent most of his time working as a labourer in different butcheries.

I am from a very religious family. I do not know how to describe it. Even now when I am sick I phone home and my mother will pray over the phone from Tsakane. My church is one of the Pentecostal Churches.

My late father used to really support me, and my mother is still supporting me a lot. There are problems in the Pentecostal Churches. Even now there are some who say they are not going to vote because they vote for Jesus. I would like to go to church but I do not have time. But if there are Christian Revivals I do go.

During the state of emergency, people used to pray and they survived. They had courage that a prayer is a very important spiritual weapon to strengthen the person.

I was a member of the Young Christian Workers. I was also a supporter of AZAPO in the East Rand. I used to read a lot, especially African literature.

I do not have enough time to spend with my family, but when I have time I use it. My wife is also on the provincial list. The coming weeks are going to be very difficult. Even during the dark days when one was hunted by the police, she would find means to contact me and encourage me. She is religious, but she also does not have time to go to church because of commitments.

### From trade unions to politics

I was elected for both the national and the provincial list, but I preferred to stay in the region. I see my role as being to fight poverty and unemployment, and contributing to economic and social development of the region, to improve the standard of living of the people. I am not being regional, we are all for a very prosperous country.

I think there will be a good relationship between the government and the trade unions. We have been interacting all these years. If you are to improve productivity in



the region, which is important for the economy, you have to have sound industrial relations.

There was a period when COSATU was very very strong in this region, around 1986-88. We occupied the vacuum that was created by the restrictions on the UDF. COSATU was also restricted, but we found that workers were prepared to resist and to defy.

### **Weaknesses**

Now there are weaknesses. People relax. Locals are no longer as vibrant as they used to be. You find shopstewards no longer prepared to take leadership positions. It may be because the conditions are no longer as bad as they used to be. During the dark days before the unbanning we were forced to resist all the time.

There is also this strategy of the employers of promoting key shopstewards. I am worried about the experienced organisers becoming industrial officers in the coming months or years. At least we are assisting to develop a less adversarial industrial relations. We need a better industrial relations environment to

increase productivity. It will be a positive development, but it will threaten the unions at the same time.

### **Sad**

It is sad to be leaving COSATU. But I have been regional secretary for a long time. I was thinking of moving anyway, maybe into the area of development. I went to a number of locals and spoke to the leadership. They are not that much worried. There are comrades in this region who are ready to take these positions. I am very optimistic about the future.

My development in the labour movement came about because workers were committed. I still wish one day to go and thank the workers of Colgate because they always were prepared to struggle. It is important for me to also mention the name of Chris Bonner, our organiser. She played a very important role in my development in the labour movement. It is important and I thank her. ☆