

BRAITEX CHOIR : SINGING FOR WORKERS

The SALB interviewed Ms Khosi Maseko, Administrator with the National Union of Textile Workers (Transvaal) and co-ordinator of the Braitex Choir (8.6.84).

SALB: How did you become involved in trade unions?

Khosi: I was working for Telephone Manufacturers of South Africa at their factory in Springs. There was a TUCSA union there but we didn't know the organiser or the shop steward and there was no one to take up grievances. Anyway there was a strike after the company dismissed three guys and all of us in the department were fired. Some MAWU (Metal and Allied Workers' Union) organisers arrived to help and this was my first introduction to FOSATU. The strike failed and workers were selectively re-employed. I did not go back. I studied some commercial subjects and then took a temporary job as administrator with NUTW which was later made permanent. My brother-in-law who is a shop steward at the Braitex factory in Springs is a member of NUTW.

SALB: And when did you become involved in music and singing? How was the Braitex choir formed?

Khosi: I have been singing in choirs since I was at school and then in the church. Our choir visited the USA. The Braitex choir is very different. The church choir was much more formal with training in musical scales. It was classic music and with no dancing. The Braitex choir draws on more traditional styles and singing is more energetic and uncontrolled - although we do use hymn tunes as well. For most of the choir members this is the first time they have sung in a choir since being at school. At first we thought of forming a FOSATU-wide choir but this would have been too scattered. Rehearsing would have been impossible. So after discussions I contacted Tiny Mabena, a shop steward

at Braitex and she recruited the singers for a choir. She knew who the best people were - those who could just stand up and start a song during a meeting. All the members work at Braitex except my nephew who has a very good voice and has been accepted by the other choir members.

The choir was limited to about twenty. Church choirs are much larger - up to 120. But there you have to stand still and if you try to dance it is chaos. To start with we obtained tapes of union songs and together with Patti Henderson we practised in a garage in Kwa Thema.

We first performed publicly at the NUTW AGM at Durban and then for the FOSATU Labour Studies Course and the NAAWU AGM. To prepare we were forced to practice more during the week - not just weekends. There are other worker choirs as well: Pretoria Auto plastics, which was the first; Frame choir; and Simba Quix choir.

SALB: And what are the aims of the choir?

Khosi: We sing for workers; preach unionism in song. Nearly everybody likes music. Some people just come for the tune but before each song there is an introduction explaining the meaning of the song. Music draws people in and holds their interest more than speeches.

In the choir everybody is a leader - and has to introduce a song. I co-ordinate the invitations to sing - but then I give the details to Tiny - the choir discusses it - and then she phones me with the decision.

We perform only to workers. A manager at Braitex wanted to make a video of us. The members rejected this. We are not performing for employers.

When we perform we wear a uniform and NUTW T-shirts.

SALB: Where do your songs come from?

Khosi: There are many different sources. We sing international songs such as "Solidarity for ever",

-Interview-

"Ballad of Joe Hill" and "The working folk of this country rise again". We have used songs by Junction Avenue Theatre Company - like a song about mineworkers who die under bad conditions. We also compose our own songs, sometimes using old tunes. We sing mostly in English and Zulu and we have just composed a Sotho song. We have prepared new songs for the FOSATU Education Workshop. One is a greeting song where we sing: "Even if I die I will still remember FOSATU". Another song is about GST and income tax. The choir sees the recent exemptions as proof of the power of the unions. Also we wrote a song about workers unity.

We try to bring new songs to the workers. We avoid performing popular songs. People just get bored with this or simply join in - and a large meeting of workers will sing much more powerfully than the choir anyway. Some of our songs have been taken up by workers and are sung in meetings. We have to work harder looking for new songs and composing ones.

SALB: Will you describe some of the songs?

Khosi: The first is an invitation song. Translating into English, we sing: "We are building a strong union so come and join us". Then the chorus: "We are waiting for you so you can come and join us." Second verse: "We are members of FOSATU come and join us." Then the chorus. Then: "More members makes us to be strong." Chorus again; then the last verse: "You will be left alone when we have conquered."

Sakha inyonyana enamandla (invitation song)

Sakha inyonyana enamandla

woz' ujoyine X 3

Chorus: Sikulindele woza ujoyine

Singamalung'e FOSATU

woz' ujoyine X 3

Chorus:

Wonke amalunga asenza

siqine X 3

Chorus:

Uzosala wedwa thina
singobile X 3

Another song is called "Grievance Procedure". The song describes a struggle at Braitex when a woman worker - Roseline Moeketsi - was sacked after she questioned her rate. The manager abused her and then fired her. The shop stewards took the issue up but the company refused to reinstate her. The union took the matter to court and won a court order to re-instate her with back pay.

The last verse of the song refers to an earlier victory at Braitex in 1982 when some 74 trade unionists were sacked. In January 1983 the company refused to collect stop orders and workers were very discouraged. By threatening legal action the union secured R40,000 compensation for workers, all long-service workers were re-instated immediately and the others were guaranteed the first option on vacancies. So in the last verse we sing: "You have forgotten the R40,000? We are going to show you. Do you think you can stand against FOSATU? "

Grievance Procedure

Mr Wandhoff ngikwenzeni ungibandlulula phakathi kwabasebenzi baseBraitex.

Hey Roselina don't tell me bull sheet, if you don't want the rate you are getting then fuck off.
Wavela laph' uvela khona wena Rosochacki
Wamamel' u Wandhoff ekutshela manga
Waxosha u Roselina ngob' ehlakaniphile
Awufun' ukulalela ama shop steward
Awufun' ukulandela ' igrievance procedure

Sizokubonisa thina usukhohliwe nge R40,000
Ucabang' ukuthi ungamelana ne FOSATU
Sizokubonisa thina usukhohliwe nge R40,000
Ucabang' ukuthi ungamelana no Cheadle.
Amandla,
Wabuya u Roselina e Braitex
Isikhwama sakhe sesine back.