

Profile of a Worker Leader



THE FOSATU Worker News here kicks off with the first of a series of interviews with FOSATU's worker leaders. The interviews are intended to show a bit about the background of the men and women elected by the FOSATU membership and what is expected of them as office bearers. While in the Transvaal recently, FWN talked to FOSATU's VICE PRESIDENT ANDREW ZULU.

I was born in Zululand at Nqutu, about forty miles from Vryheid in Natal. My parents worked on a small holding doing ploughing that sort of thing.

Q. At what age did you start school?

I think at about the age of eleven or somewhere round there. It was a mission school.

Q. When did you leave?

I left in 1960 after my father said he couldn't afford to let me carry on. So I came up to Johannesburg through a football club. I was sort of pro at football by then, although there was no such thing as professional soccer. I was recommended to a club based in Johannesburg called the NQ Brothers.

Q. How long did you play soccer for?

From 1961 till 1973, somewhere round there. I then registered in Germiston and started working at Dorman Long. Later I moved to Stonestreet - this is my fourteenth year there. I started as a packer but then was promoted to storeman.

Q. When did you become aware of the need for a trade union?

While learning history at school I began to realise how unsatisfactory things were in this country and began to look for ways to fight

back. I heard of the Metal and Allied Workers Union in 1977. One of my co-workers pulled me aside and told me there was an organisation which could give us some protection in the factory. We both went to the union offices and one of the organisers explained to us what the union was all about and the kind of risks we would be taking by joining the union. Both of us started organising in the factory by picking on those we could trust until we had organised the majority of the workers.

Q. Was organising very difficult?

Very difficult as at that time there were no unions and people were very suspicious. Some thought the union would protect them without them having to do any work towards the union.

Q. How long did it take you to organise the factory?

It took us about two to three months. We organised about 60 out of the 80 workers at the factory - leaving out the spies. Even some of the impimpis joined us because they expected miracles. As time went on they dropped out.

Q. Were there any strikes?

Yes, we had some strikes but not major strikes as such. Our first strike followed the firing of one of our members who was very active in the union - he used to organise

during working hours. At that time there was a liaison committee but we ignored them after we had joined the union as they did not really represent the workers. I was one of the shop stewards who went straight to management to ask why they had fired this man. They threatened to fire us. We said we did not care about that we just wanted to know why this man had been fired. We suspected they had fired him because of his union activities. The following day we all gathered in the changing rooms. The director came in and demanded to know what was going on. I explained to him that we were dissatisfied with the way our brother had been handled - he should have been given a chance, or at least warned. This was the first time management had heard of the union but they agreed not to victimise union members and said they would consult with the shop stewards.

Q. Do you think management were serious about talking to union shop stewards?

They were suspicious, but they were more afraid than we were. They were not sure how to handle us, as we were the only factory in the area that had joined the union. MAWU was very small at that time they had only organised about five factories.

Q. Did you help organise other factories?

Yes, we helped pass on the spirit of unionism.

Q. Were you involved in the talks which led for the formation of FOSATU?

Yes, very much involved

Q. Were you conscious of a policy of non-racialism at that time?

As far as I am concerned I don't believe in racialism. I don't believe you have to black, red or yellow to assist in the worker struggle in South Africa. If you are doing the right thing for workers it does not matter what colour you are. Although, I must admit when I first entered unions I was suspicious of white involvement but all my experience since then has shown me that in the real worker struggle there is no place for racism.

Although, I know that the problems in South Africa are largely economic and social, the solution is political. You've got to know which line you are taking because I do not believe that the worker struggle is not a political struggle. Worker participation in FOSATU is the only thing which can guide the organisation in the right direction.

Q. Looking back did you think unions would grow to this size?

I never believed we would reach this stage so quickly. I never

dreamt workers would show so much interest in union activities because when I started people believed we would be arrested as we were involved in what they called communism. Anything you did against management was viewed as communism.

Q. Have you travelled a lot since becoming vice-president?

We travel a lot to organise workers and to attend meetings of MAWU and FOSATU. I have also been sent by FOSATU overseas. This was the first time I had been outside the borders of South Africa. I was amazed to hear people overseas talking about our country. If we can do as much as possible ourselves in the struggle, we can expect strong support from workers outside South Africa.

Q. How do you see your position as FOSATU's vice-president?

I have a duty to organise workers in the struggle and to develop worker leadership. I'm not here for the position. Workers have to learn to fight for themselves and it's not something that can be achieved next year. They have got to learn to think of the future - their children must benefit from the struggle.

There is no doubt that FOSATU will continue to grow as unlike some other unions who shout a lot, FOSATU meets its words with actions.

COUNCIL'S WAGES BETTERED

WITHIN six weeks of gaining recognition at Leyland SA's warehouse and repair shop in Elandsfontein, NAAWU negotiated a new wage deal for its members at the plant.

Wages for the lowest paid workers went from R1,71 per hour to R1,95 per hour - an increase of 14 per cent.

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While this is still far from the new minimum of R3,50 demanded by NAAWU, it represents a sizeable increase won by the new shop steward committee in their first negotiation.

ABOVE

It is also 95c per hour, or 95 percent, above the minimum negotiated in the Industrial Council under which this branch of Leyland falls - the National Industrial Council for the Motor Industry.

It is no wonder that workers changed their membership from the union which sits on the council, MICWU, to NAAWU.

Union Merger



THE Glass and Allied Workers Union has merged with the Chemical Workers Industrial Union - a move aimed at consolidating membership in these two sectors of the chemical industry.

The merger follows discussions at last year's FOSATU Congress on the need to build broad-based industrial unions.

COMMON

The union's Executives felt there were many areas in common between the two unions and it was decided that a merger would strengthen workers' bargaining

power.

GAWU's president, Ronald Mofokeng said: 'The main advantage in joining CWIU is that we will have more power to cope with the problems being presented by the recession.'

SHORTAGE

He said his union had struggled because of a shortage of funds, this would be overcome by the pooling of the two union's resources.

The new union, which will keep the name of the Chemical Workers Industrial Union, now plans to expand into the major glass producers.