

Profile

From grassroots organiser to union president

Morice Smithers interviews SAM SHILOWA, who was speaking at the time as president of TGWU. Since then, he has been elected assistant general secretary of COSATU.

I was born on 30 February 1958 in what is now the Giyane area of Gazankulu. It was just a year before we were forcibly removed as part of the consolidation of the bantustans. My father was 68 at the time and a state pensioner.

It was very difficult to grow up in such conditions. My parents and my brother and sister were not working, so we often had to go hungry. We always relied on my aunt who was working as a domestic servant in Johannesburg, even though she was earning very little in those days. We were also able to get something from the land – though even if you had land, you had to have money to buy seeds and there were no tractors. You had to either hire someone with a span of oxen or otherwise it meant going to the fields and hoeing by hand.

I started going to school in 1967, a year later than I should have. My sister and my brother had to leave school so that my parents could at least afford my education. So for me to get a better education, two people had to sacrifice. I was able to communicate well at school. I was chair of the debating forum and I was a leader in the SCM.

I started to become aware of what was happening throughout the country after June 16, 1976, especially because many parents in the cities sent their kids to the rural areas where they thought they would get safer and better education. So there was a fusion of two types of the same generation with different perspectives. Soon we began to start debating how we

could improve conditions at school and to start challenging things like the question of corporal punishment. As a result I was expelled when in Standard 9.

Starting work

In 1979, I started to work at Nola Industries in Randfontein. I left in 1980 and moved to Anglo Alpha and it was there that I first got involved in unions. At first there was only a liaison committee on which I served. But the company didn't take the committee very seriously and so they didn't fulfil promises they made when there were disputes. So we started to look for a union. I came into contact with GAWU, while others started to organise for the Transport Workers Union which was very conservative. Like TGWU, they organised transport, security and cleaning. It leaned more towards management and had negotiated various closed shop agreements.

By 1984, a few of us were organised into GAWU and others into TWU. Then I got promoted to a senior position. I think it was partly with the aim of drawing me out of the liaison committee and to prevent me from organising workers into the union. But the new position gave me more scope, because I was involved in training and so I had access to all workers. So even though I was using company slides to teach disciplinary codes and so forth, I always made a point of emphasising the need for workers to be organised. By the time they came to realise that we were able to use our

positions in that way, GAWU was already fairly organised and asking for access.

While that was happening, COSATU was formed which caused uneasiness amongst many of the workers who became uncertain of the future of GAWU. They decided to join the transport union, which then gained majority. So even though some of us felt it would have been important to have stayed with GAWU, we felt that for the sake of worker unity, and to ensure that we could continue to challenge management, we should move to that union. Then once things had clarified, we would obviously move workers into GAWU or any relevant union which sprang up. I was one of the first shopstewards after recognition, but I once again lost my job, this time as a result of a wage dispute. The union didn't take up my case, though some individual workers did try and speak for me, but it was of no use.

From trainer to security guard

It was then very difficult to find work. But eventually I got a job at Pritchard Security - at first at R285 per month. I continued to organise in the new company. The first dispute I was involved in took place when a shopsteward was dismissed and we campaigned for eight months to get him reinstated - and succeeded. It was a major victory because it was the first time in that company that workers were prepared to take strike action. We were not properly organised and we had no agreement with the company, but at least we were able to tackle them on that.

I was elected vice chair of the Transvaal T&G branch in 1988 and the vice secretary of the Johannesburg local. I was therefore able to attend national meetings of T&G and get an overview of what was happening in the union as a whole. In 1990, I was nominated at NEC level to be 2nd vice-president. I held that position until the T&G congress this year.

Before the congress I was approached by a number of people to stand for the presidency of T&G, but I was reluctant because I felt I could play a better role either remaining as vice president or even going back to the branch. I felt that it is always better to be led because it is easier to make criticisms than when you are in the hot seat yourself. I also feel that it is important that we don't concentrate able leadership at national level, but we must ensure we also have grassroots and middle layer leadership.

Unfortunately I did not have things my own way and I was elected into the presidency. I am

also currently the vice-chairperson of the COSATU Wits region.

Challenges facing the union

■ Registration of security workers

Part of the motivation for registering security workers is to regulate the industry. The union is not in principle opposed to this, but we are opposed to the manner in which it is being done. The whole question of police involvement in the industry is a particular problem for us.

But having realised that many people from other companies, especially those which are not unionised, had registered, we decided that as a tactic we would also register so that we can fight from inside as a united force rather than being divided.

Through the registration issue, security firms also want to block the formation of an industrial council for the industry. However, we are campaigning for an industrial council for workers in security and cleaning in order to have wages and other conditions of employment negotiated at national level.

The government has agreed to a Working Group to look at amendments to the present Security Officers Act in a way that would be acceptable to us. It has representatives from Manpower, the unions, employers and consumer groups representing clients who, it is said, also want the industry to be regulated.

■ The SARHWU - TGWU merger

Both SARHWU and TGWU have realised that we need a merger. But we must be able to carry it out in such a way that workers are able to defend it and that workers outside of transport also feel secure. It must be done in such a way that it does not just discard the cleaners and security workers who form an important part of T&G now.

The National Executives of the two unions have met, a facilitating committee for a merger has been formed and a number of subcommittees have been set up, so it is an ongoing process.

■ Organising difficulties

There have been problems in terms of the union being able to service the membership. We have unfortunately had organisers who have just not done their jobs properly. In one case, the issue of retrenchments came up during wage negotiations. This is a highly labour intensive industry and employers use the issue of unemployment

to move from in-house cleaning to contract cleaning. One strategy we believe should be utilised, is that when a company is going to move from in-house to contract, both the union and the workers must negotiate with the present employers to say that any company that comes in must take all those workers already there. This will help to save their jobs and because they are already organised, it is easy to force the new company to continue to recognise the union.

Another problem is that the cleaning industry operates using shiftwork and many union meetings take place at a time when workers are at work. In the transport sector, workers are on the road a lot of the time. The union has to look at ways of organising meetings either at the weekend or at times which will suit workers and help to draw them into our structures.

Another factor we find difficult to deal with is the small number of workers in each company or area. In some cases, cleaning or security workers don't even know which company is employing them. When they are dismissed, they don't even know where their company's head office is.

So these problems mean that either workers don't get serviced at all or even if they do, they don't see themselves as part of union, but rather that it is just some sort of insurance. That is a challenge facing us.

Having a security worker like myself as president of the union has helped to focus more attention on the needs of cleaners and security. This has given confidence to those working in these sectors.

■ Bus industry

The crisis in the bus industry is one which affects not only workers in the industry, but also the community which uses buses. We are involved in discussions with the entire management of the bus industry, that is SABOA, and with the state. But T&G alone would not be enough to save the situation. T&G is calling for nationalisation - we don't believe public transport can be left entirely in private hands. If it is in private hands, then there must be heavy subsidies.

We must tackle this issue now, rather than leave it to a new government to sort out. A key thing to remember is that people are staying far away from their places of employment as a result of the removals policies of apartheid. They are not looking for transport for pleasure, they want transport to get them to work on time.

This must be provided for.

■ Other issues:

There are a number of other issues facing the union:

- Many cleaners are women and so we have to ensure the development of women so that they are able to occupy leadership positions within the union and within society as a whole.
- How are we going stem retrenchments or alternatively how do we deal with the question of job creation.
- The union must do more to advance COSATU. If we agree that COSATU is built by its affiliates, it therefore means that each union will have to play its part in shaping the policies of COSATU.
- Also, our union has taken a resolution supporting the maintenance and strengthening of the tripartite alliance, so we have to put that into practice by encouraging workers to join the ANC and the party, and to involve themselves actively in these structures.

The Alliance

I am on the SACP Interim leadership group in the Transvaal, I am the president of T&G, I am the chief shopsteward at work, I am vice chair of the COSATU Wits region and I am the information officer of my ANC branch, so the multi-hats issue is an important one for me.

In terms of my involvement in the SACP and ANC, I see it as a contribution, not as Sam, but as part of the working class. While the ANC is a national liberation movement, it acknowledges that its major component is workers. So I think that at this stage it would be suicidal for us to distance ourselves from the ANC even in terms of taking up leadership.

As for the SACP, there is a challenge for those who believe in the principles and policies of the party. It was been underground since 1953, and during those years, many people were forced into exile, were sent to prison or died. Those of us who have had the chance of surviving any of this have to make our contribution.

In a resolution, our union has said that we have to strengthen the alliance of the ANC and the party because we are all fighting for national liberation and it is important for worker leaders to make themselves available for positions. But I cannot say I am not able to attend an important union meeting or COSATU meeting because there is an ANC meeting at the same time. So

we are saying it is not the principle of whether one should occupy different positions, it is the practise, and anyone who accepts a position must look into whether they will be able to fulfil their mandated duties properly.

People talk about the number of COSATU people who are in the ANC or are communists and worry about whether COSATU compromises on issues when the other alliance members push a different position. This doesn't happen. We do not retreat in the face of ANC or party positions.

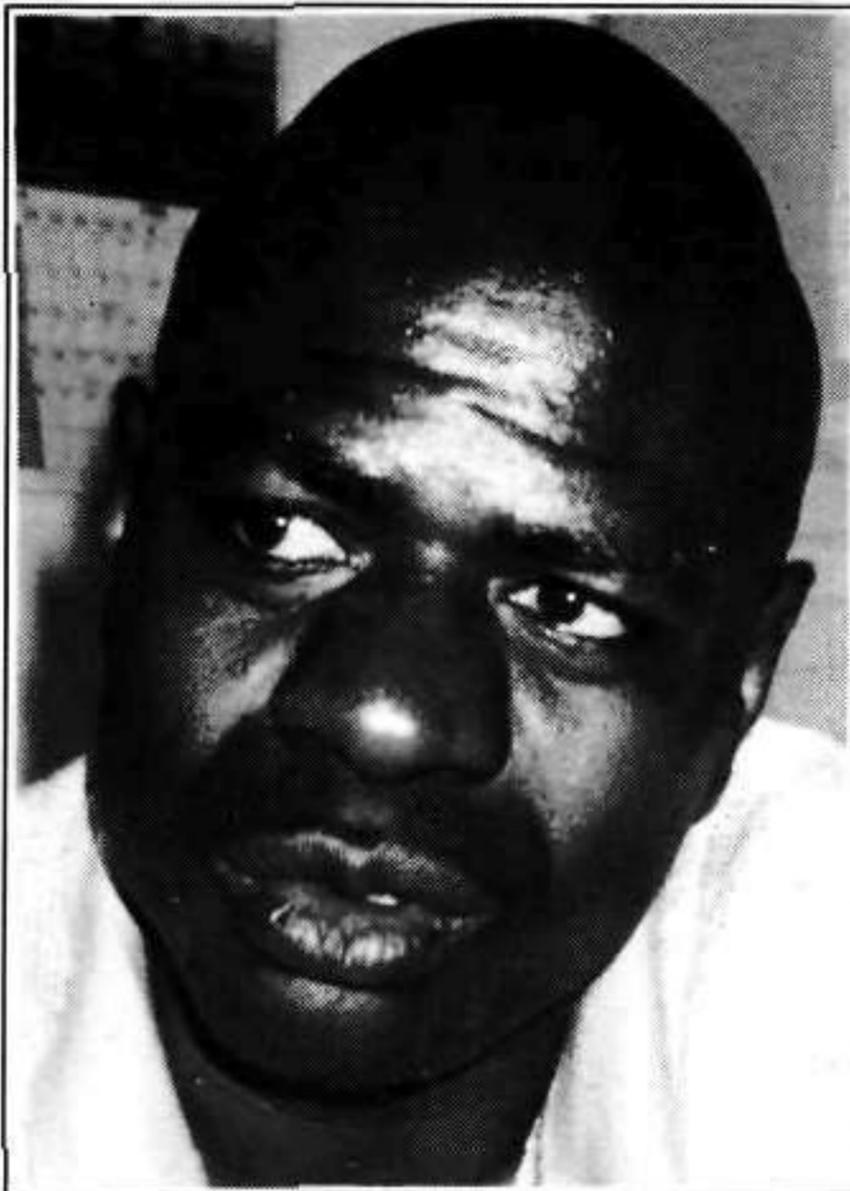
In the case of the ANC, we have been very critical, and they haven't said 'Hold on, you are ANC members as well in your branches, what are you doing about the situation.' or said we should not be critical. They recognise that we are representing a particular constituency. But this is a long debate which is just beginning.

Of course, there may well be a parting of ways of the alliance partners in the future depending on the outcome of national liberation. I think it may happen that the ANC and the party may not part ways - for example, in Cuba you had the nationalists and communists coming together and working jointly in the government. It will depend on the decisions of the membership. But as of now the common objective is to get rid of apartheid and to ensure that we have elections.

COSATU is not an affiliate of the ANC or the party. Therefore we are independent and we decide which direction we take. We are an organ of civil society like civics and others similar structures, and so we can align ourselves at any given time to a political party if we choose. But there is common agreement amongst those who are for and against the multi cap position that COSATU should remain independent.

My understanding of independence is that COSATU must work out its mandates based on the feeling of its members. So it doesn't matter if the general secretary of COSATU is a communist or a nationalist. What matters most is that that particular person must act according to the mandate of his or her particular constituency.

If we accept that premise, it goes without saying that COSATU will remain a pressure group whether the ANC is in power or not. One thing we must learn from Eastern Europe is that unions must not simply be a conveyor belt for political parties. The independence of unions is important so that they can properly serve the working class interests of their members.



The personal and the political

I do not wear the hat of a husband at this stage, but this is not because of all the other hats that I wear. I do have a kid that stays with my mum, so I am a father. I do have relationship, even though we only see each other once in many weeks. But I have my own doubts - I accept that one can't be a revolutionary and ignore other aspects of one's life, so one has to keep a balance on that. But I feel that one doesn't have to rush into marriage. It is important to nurse and nurture whatever relationship one has so that people understand one another and are able to tolerate one another. Each must understand that the other partner has a role to play in structures. One shouldn't have to choose either the union, the struggle or the wife. One should be able to have both.

Workers in our country must realise that there is no way that we can be apolitical. Our first responsibility is to build our own unions, but if we want a future SA where democracy is going to prevail, we cannot sit and wish for the ANC or SACP to be democratic - we must actually move into these structures and become active so that we are able, from the bottom, to influence the question of the type of leadership that we have and the type of policies being followed. Both these organisations have got as part of their constitutions the right to recall and we must exercise that right. ☆