

PROFILE

IN THIS THE SECOND INTERVIEW WITH FOSATU OFFICE BEARERS, FOSATU WORKER NEWS TALKS TO THE FEDERATION'S PRESIDENT, CHRIS DLAMINI.

FOR Chris Dlamini FOSATU has become a way of life.

Much of his time is spent either addressing mass meetings as FOSATU's president, talking to representatives of international trade unions or chairing the federation's highest decision making body, the Central Committee.

'In fact I am hardly at work or at home,' he often jokes.

Yet like all of FOSATU's office bearers, his experience at the factory is his qualification for being elected president of the country's largest non-racial union federation.

And within FOSATU the factory where Chris is senior shop steward — Kelloggs at Springs — has quite a reputation.

Not only does it have capable shop stewards like Chris, the unity and discipline of the workers has enabled them to win tremendous victories.

They have been so successful; in fact, that the white artisans at the factory have also joined FOSATU's Sweet Food and Allied Workers Union — breaking down apartheid's racial barriers.

Ever since Chris Dlamini first started work — at the Consolidated Brass Foundry — he has always fought for worker rights.

'I remember once when the company introduced a canteen system — where you could get a quarter of a loaf of bread for free.

The old lady who was running the canteen used to supply us with stale bread and people used to grumble but they never did anything.

Well one day I had had enough of this stale bread so I went back to her.

Look, I said, the company decided to give us bread but it never said you should give us stale bread.

She started swearing at me, so I threw the bread into a basket next to the counter.

Well, she phoned the general manager who came in and dragged me by my dustcoat to the top manager's office.

He told me I should be dismissed for such an action but I asked for a chance to defend myself.

I stated my reasons why I rejected the bread and even brought the stale bread to him.

Well, he said to me, don't you think you should have adopted a different attitude when you spoke to the white woman.

I replied that I don't know. If one is angry it doesn't matter if the person is white or black as far as I am concerned.

In spite of everybody expecting me to be fired, I wasn't.

Chris always felt there was a need for workers to have some kind of representation — but definitely not a liaison committee.

'When I worked at Rank Xerox, before I moved to Kellogg, I was elected to the liaison committee, which frustrated me a lot.

LIAISON COMMITTEES ALLOW WORKERS ONLY TO AIR THEIR PROBLEMS — BUT NOTHING WAS EVER DONE.

Workers would give us a mandate to make demands but when we arrived at the meeting it was dominated by management and some supervisors.

Immediately the chairman, who is always one of management, wants to close the matter, he just closes it.

And if you are dissatisfied you are told that you can find a job somewhere else.

At times we managed to air our grievances and the bosses would say they would investigate the matter and come back to us — but nothing ever happened.

Because of our powerlessness we were forced to talk about whether the forks and knives were nice, whether the tables were clean, whether the lawn was OK or whether we had enough equipment for sports. That kind of jazz.'

BEFORE THE UNIONS PEOPLE WERE INHUMANLY TREATED BY THEIR BOSSES.

Chris spoke of the times before the unions when people were exploited financially, were beaten and inhumanely treated by bosses and often had money deducted from their wages for damages done while on duty.

'What was really aggravating was that workers could be dismissed without any notice and for no apparent reason.

And as a result of this dismissal, a worker would lose his house, children would be forced to leave school and that would mean a dead end for that family's future.'

Chris said that the presence of the union at Kelloggs certainly eliminated some of these malpractices as workers could elect representatives of their choice who would fight for them.

'The presence of the union has meant that a balance of power has emerged between management and the workers.

If workers are well organised the bosses are forced to realise that we are not just people who produce things in their factory but real human beings with rights.

In Kelloggs, through the we have blocked retrenchments, have fought for a living wage and this year we achieved R2 an hour.



Workers deserve a fair share of what they have produced and this can be achieved by a worker organisation.

WORKER CONTROL IS CRUCIAL TO BUILDING A WORKING CLASS ORGANISATION.

But it must be worker controlled and that is why FOSATU sees worker control as crucial for the building of an organisation which will help the working class.'

Chris, then, as a worker leader was not elected because of any formal educational qualifications but because of his experience of the hardship faced by him and his fellow workers on the shop floor.

Living in the Spring's township of KwaThema, Chris is the first to admit that a worker cannot be separated from his community. But that does not mean, he says, that his union must link up with the many community organisations existing in this country.

'I am convinced that the worker movement cannot be pushed to link up with non-worker organisations because that might hinder or misdirect its programme of action.

Workers at this stage are enslaved by the economy and the challenge facing them and their unions is to make the economy their slave.'

Following the independence of Zimbabwe, many people in South Africa have also been discussing liberation. Chris has recently visited Zimbabwe for a conference of the International Food Unions so we asked him what he thought — as a worker.

'During the time in Zimbabwe, I noticed that although some people were liberated workers were not.

While there I visited a factory where we were shown round by a black general manager who kept on telling us about the good relations there were between the workers and management since they had taken over.

Well, I sneaked off and talked to one ordinary worker who painted a very different picture of what was happening in the factory.

The worker said they did not have a union inside the factory, wages were low and conditions were bad.

They had nobody to turn to when they wanted to raise factory floor grievances.

ONLY A STRONG WORKER MOVEMENT CAN ACHIEVE WORKER LIBERATION.

It seems to me that the people in Zimbabwe were taken up with the popular struggle but failed to organise themselves into a worker organisation, like a union, which would have then liberated them as workers in their workplaces.

Now they are faced with the problem of starting from scratch — having to organise themselves into a union to fight the bosses in the factory.

Worker liberation can only be achieved by a strong, well-organised worker movement.'



ONE of Chris Dlamini's major tasks as FOSATU President is to chair the Central Committee which meets twice a year. Here Chris (with his back to us) calls the meeting to order at the last meeting of the Central Committee held in April.