

Profile

I'm still just a member of the NUM team

The new acting general secretary of NUM, Kgalema Motlanthe, talks to Snuki Zikalala

As the new acting general secretary of NUM, I don't see myself as the most important person in NUM. Whatever I do will have to represent what the collective thinks. I'm part of the team.

That is how I have been working as the education co-ordinator of the union and I don't think there are going to be any drastic changes. A lot will depend on how we pull the team together.

To be honest with you, I did not expect to be elected as the acting secretary general of the union. I had been out of the office for almost two months, and was not aware that people had an eye on me. I even came late to the meeting and was not officially dressed for the occasion. Well, I still have to come to terms with it. It was quite overwhelming.

I have been involved in negotiations with the management as part of a back up team negotiating with ISCOR. I have gained a lot of experience from those negotiations. It

is not going to be easy sailing as the acting secretary general. A lot will be expected from me.

Early life

I was born on 19 July 1949 in Alexandra. My father was working at Anglo American Corporation Head office until he was pensioned. He has passed away. My mother worked in a number of places as a washer woman and a machinist. She is pensioned. I have two brothers.

I am married and we have three children. My wife works at Lera-tong hospital as a Radiographer.

I started my primary education in Alexandra until my family moved to Meadowlands in 1959. After completing my High school, I joined the Johannesburg City Council and worked in what was then known as the Commercial Branch, running bottle stores in the townships. I was a supervisor in a number of bottle stores in Soweto until I was arrested in April 1976 for ANC activities.

Prison years

I was charged under the terrorism act: belonging to an illegal organisation, trying to set up MK structures, and for the possession of reading material and of weapons.

I was sentenced to 15 years but served only ten years and got released in April 1987. It is difficult to tell you about my life at the Island in three minutes. The understanding of ex-Islanders is that the story can never be told by one person, because it involves the experiences of many people. We are hoping for the day when we can come together and write a detailed account of our lives on the Island. I gained a lot from political discussions we held.

The labour movement

I was released at the time of the SARWHU strike and this influenced me to join the labour movement. I joined NUM in June 1987. And of course, as you remember, in 1987 there was a national strike on the mines. I was given the task of co-ordinating the strike support committee. That gave me the opportunity to meet with many of the people who were active, because I had been out of circulation for something like eleven years. I came into contact with people who helped me understand the comrades who were working in the UDF and other structures.

We organised solidarity across a broad spectrum of political organisations and students organisations. Students from Witwatersrand University organised themselves into a number of brigades. Some were in charge of transport, others of accommodation, some were fund raisers. We had similar support from NAMDA. Their members attended to miners who were injured.

Though the 1987 strike ended with a number of injuries, this does not mean that we won't involve our membership in strike action again. But we need to emphasise that a strike is always a weapon of last resort.

Union education

I came into the union as an education instructor. I was then asked to co-ordinate education. As an education instructor I was faced with a challenge of getting ordinary people who had no elementary education to understand concepts that are difficult to explain in vernacular. The majority of mineworkers come from rural areas. One has to find a simple mechanism of explaining the whole process of production and concepts like capitalism. We would encourage

members to explain to us about their life experience, working and living conditions and we would then interpret it for them. In that way they would "grasp" the intricacies of the capitalist mode of production.

I had a staff of six people. At the moment we are trying to move away from the approach that only six people should be involved in education. I believe that workers themselves should be involved in education. Miners are staying in hostels, and this makes it possible for them to organise study groups.

Political role

About my political life, I am not a member of the SACP. I have no problems at all with the organisation, nor the collapse of the Eastern Bloc. We should draw lessons from that experience. We should avoid falling into similar grooves or traps, so that whatever we intend building in future should be the desire of the people.

What is important is that we should always keep in contact and be accountable to people we are representing. We should never allow bureaucracy to cut us from the people we are representing.

Two hats

On the question of two hats, I don't think it is in itself a problem. The primary role for me is to unite the workers, make sure that they remain an united force and that whoever belongs to the ANC or to the SACP should not transform NUM into either the party or the ANC. NUM is first and foremost a trade union. I think we should try our level best to inculcate the spirit of independence in the union. The union should see itself as an independent formation. Not an appendage of this or that political organisation.

An ANC government will not change the attitude of the union that much. The union's role is to articulate the interests of the mineworkers and it has to do that without fear at all. I think that the ANC government will be able to create a favourable political superstructure within which we as a trade union can conduct our business.

CODESA

It was surprising for the press and a number of people to hear that we have taken a different view from COSATU on CODESA. The situation in the country is in flux. A decision that may be correct today, may actually have no relation with the



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reality of tomorrow or two days later.

Our CEC revisited this question and came to the conclusion that COSATU's participation at CODESA can only lead to more complications. The correct approach is that COSATU should not participate in CODESA. Because if it opens up the flood gates for all organisations, some of which are not that political, we may actually turn CODESA into a jamboree. CODESA has an important task to accomplish. Therefore the leaner and more streamlined it is, the better for all of us.

We should articulate the interests of the workers through the ANC-SACP-COSATU alliance. COSATU should work through the alliance. COSATU should allow a proper division of labour to take place. I would be totally opposed to the ANC partaking for instance in collective bargaining issues at industry level.

Union independence

It is a fact that there were problems before in the alliance, just after the organisations were un-

banned. The ANC and the SACP took decisions on behalf of COSATU. That has now been solved. If it happens again, COSATU has to take the blame. COSATU has to assert its independence and not be forced into issues, otherwise the whole notion of the alliance is meaningless.

The immediate challenge facing us at the moment is to improve the quality of service that we give to our members. The second is to achieve maximum unity in the industry. Presently there are half a million people employed in the mining industry, and we have 300 000 members.

It is for us to change the quality of life of mineworkers and empower them to partake meaningfully in influencing the immediate circumstances of their lives, both at the work place and in the rural areas where they live.

Since the last strike in 1987, NUM has been restructuring as a number of people were dismissed in that year. Our major task will be to consolidate and strengthen the structures that are existing at the moment. ☆