

**Sipho Kubheka**, *general secretary of the Paper, Printing, Wood and Allied Workers' Union (PPWAWU)*, talks to **Snuki Zikalala**.

"The labour movement has to fight for its independence. The ANC will not be able to address the contradictions between capital and labour."

Things have changed dramatically. We are now moving away from the politics of resistance to that of reconstruction. The current situation in PPWAWU demands innovative leadership, to cope with vibrant debates on macro and micro economic issues. Education and job creation will be our main focus for the year. We have to recruit highly skilled people who will bring in fresh ideas.

The labour movement has to fight for its independence from political parties, regardless of who is in power. I do not see the ANC being able to address all the ills and the scars of apartheid. The ANC will also not be able to address the contradictions between capital and labour.

The trade unions as part and parcel of the civil society need to be very strong, or an ANC-led government will not be able to deliver the goods. Trade unions will have to address the bread-and-butter issues of workers. They will not be immune from politics.

I am one of the people who supports the wearing of two hats. But one must have priorities. Membership of a political party should not affect a person's duties in the labour movement. The elected position must take priority. I am a member of the SACP but because of the pressure of work in PPWAWU, I cannot participate fully in its activities. I joined the SACP because of its long-term socialist project, whereby person-to-person

exploitation shall be removed.

It is unfortunate the SACP does not have a coherent economic programme. It is still linked to the political programme of the ANC and this confuses workers.

### Early life

I was born on 29 August 1953 in Alexandra township, where I grew up. I come from a family of five. My mother was a domestic servant.

I went up to Standard 9 at the Alexandra Secondary School. Because of our poverty, I had to sell coal from a wheelbarrow in the township. On weekends I was a golf caddie at Glendower golf course.

My family was separated through apartheid. In 1964, the state alleged that my parents did not qualify under Section 10 to stay in Alexandra. They had to squat in Soweto and from then we never lived a normal life or had a house of our own. I remained in Alexandra with my uncle, who played a very important role in my life.

### Starting work and union activity

For financial reasons, I was forced to start work at an early age. In 1972, I was employed as a clerk by a wholesale company called Imextra House. There I met ANC veteran Alias Mance, who organised us as a force in that

company.

During that year, I was introduced to the Industrial Aid Society (IAS), formed by the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) [then operating underground - *ed*] and Wits students. Our white IAS colleagues had been rejected and isolated by the black consciousness movement.

During weekends I attended classes on labour and politics organised by SACTU members in the IAS. Although the Wits lecturer Phil Bonner and trade unionist Bernie Fanaroff were not in full agreement with SACTU politics, they played an important role. They taught us trade union politics.

Debates at IAS centred around the formation of industrial and general unions. I initially supported general unions but was later convinced industrial unions were the most formidable force of the working class.

The influence of IAS became stronger. At Imextra, my activities and the influence I had on the workers was not welcomed by management. In 1974, two of us were summarily dismissed. Workers went on strike for a week, their demands being our re-instatement and the recognition of a workers' committee. The company agreed to recognise the workers' committee but they were not prepared to take us back.

My dismissal case was taken to the Supreme Court. I lost it. I was then employed as a full-time organiser for the IAS.

### **IAS and the formation of MAWU**

IAS at that time dealt mainly with workers' grievances: bad working conditions, long working hours, starvation wages and arbitrary dismissals.

Organising workers was not that easy. Workers were afraid to be associated with people involved in politics, because of bannings and the incarceration of our leaders, like Nelson Mandela, on Robben Island.

I visited factories at lunch-time and pretended I was looking for employment. I would ask about conditions of employment and wages. Workers were open with me. I would target and befriend the most influential and

outspoken worker, explaining about the IAS and the role that could be played by workers in solving their problems at plant level. Most individuals I approached became the main organisers.

We concentrated mainly on metal and engineering workers because of the importance of those industries in the economy. I was instrumental in the formation of the Metal and Allied Workers Union (MAWU) in 1975.

In 1976, like many other union leaders, I was served with a banning order and that stopped me from being very active in trade unions for five years, though I did attend seminars organised by IAS. Together with Gavin Andersson, who was the secretary of MAWU and was also banned, we bought old machines from an auction and formed a woodworkers' co-operative. We sold furniture to workers and community organisations at reasonable prices.

### **From MAWU to PPWAWU**

My banning order expired in 1981, but I only rejoined the unions in 1984.

I found I had missed a lot. There were hot debates around registration and the participation of unions in the Industrial Council. MAWU had affiliated to FOSATU, confining itself to shopfloor issues. My desire was to involve workers in the politics of resistance.

I applied to rejoin MAWU, but my application was never answered. I was not surprised as I had political differences with the leadership of MAWU at that time. They were vehemently opposed to the involvement of workers in the political struggle.

In 1984, the then general secretary of Paper Wood and Allied Workers Union (PWAWU), Refiloe Ndzutha, and branch secretary Jeremy Baskin, asked me to join the union.

I was employed as an organiser. I organised workers from pulp and paper, wood and waste paper factories into the union. Though big companies like Mondi, Sappi and Nampak were already organised, small wood and waste paper companies managed by conservative whites were fighting against the unionisation of their companies.