

interview

Union:
The Southern African Clothing and Textile Workers Union (SACTWU)

Country:
South Africa

Text:
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1

BEAUTY ZIBULA

From factory to parliament

After 41 years as a sample machinist, Beauty Zibula was elected as a Member of Parliament for KwaZulu Natal province in South Africa in the country's national elections in May 2019. The election ended her four decade long career as a shop steward, which saw her assuming many leadership positions in her union, the Southern African Clothing and Textile Workers Union (SACTWU).

At the time of the election she was the second Deputy President of SACTWU, which has over 108,000 members in the textile, garment and leather sectors. Zibula was in her teens when she got her first job in a garment factory in Durban, South Africa in 1978.

What was it like to be a trade unionist under South Africa's apartheid regime?

"I got my first job at IM Lockhat at the height of the struggle against apartheid. It was a difficult period for South African citizens, workers and trade unions. As activists for democracy we were always under surveillance by the notorious police special branch of the repressive apartheid regime. I was arrested and detained many times as I was not only a trade unionist but also campaigned for the African National Congress (ANC), which at the time was a banned organization. Some were jailed while others were killed. Nelson Mandela and our leaders from KwaZulu Natal – Dullah Omar and Harry Gwala - were in prison on Robben Island.

"It was under these tough conditions that I started organizing workers, who were reluctant to join a union. Moreover, the employers discouraged workers from joining the union. Wages were segregated according to race, with the black African workers earning the lowest compared to white, Indian and coloured¹ workers. Unionists were always seen by employers with a lot of suspicion. But my unionist had explained to me that my important task was to unify workers at the factory; and I managed to bring many Indian and African workers into the union."

Describe your 20-year experience at Prestige apparel. What would you describe as the main challenges after the democratic breakthrough in 1994?

"The ANC and other liberation movements were unbanned. Mandela and other ANC leaders had been released from Robben Island in 1990s, and freedom was in the air. There was the democratic breakthrough in 1994

 www.sactwu.org.za

¹ *IndustriALL*

² Beauty Zibula supporting *IndustriALL*'s campaign in the textile sector. *IndustriALL*

1. This is a South African term referring to mixed race people.

and the ANC won the first democratic elections. I was thrilled. There was freedom at last after years of struggle. Then the new Constitution guaranteed workers' rights; workers' rights including the right to strike became constitutional rights.

"I moved to Prestige Apparel but was still employed as a sample machinist, but this company was different. The machines were new and better. The company really tried to update to new technologies unlike the old machines that we were used to at IM Lockhat.

"As unions, we started campaigning for the Labour Relations Act and when it was passed it was a victory for workers. The benefits of the LRA are still felt today. It gives organizational rights to trade unions, promotes collective bargaining, and provides for the resolution of labour disputes through conciliation, mediation and arbitration and labour courts. The law also provides for a simplified procedure for the registration of unions.

"Another victory was on maternity leave, as found in the Basic Conditions of Employment Act. We fought hard as unions for this to happen, and it was sweet victory for women when we got maternity leave benefits."

Describe your rise through the union ranks from a factory shop steward to a second Deputy President?

"Being a union shop steward is hard work which requires dedication. As a union leader you learn a lot along the way through the meetings, representing workers when there are grievances with employers and when you sit in collective bargaining councils to negotiate for collective bargaining agreements. When you succeed in your work in the union, it is rare that you do it alone, but you work with others as a collective. In SACTWU we worked as a collective and participated in the activities of our federation, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU).

"I learnt a lot as the regional chairperson of COSATU because I worked with trade unions that organize in other sectors, thus giving me an opportunity to learn and understand what those unions were doing.

"I also gained valuable experience by sitting on the National Bargaining Council for the clothing industry – an important council for the garment sector in South Africa from where we have negotiated better wages and working conditions for the workers."



2

How do you find your union experience useful in the National Assembly?

"I have not been on this journey alone, I have walked with others as well. And would like to use this opportunity to thank IndustriALL and all the comrades that I worked with in the regional women's committee. I will miss the union but will cherish the valuable experience that I gained.

"After my studies at the Workers College in Durban, and my experience in the union, I have learnt to appreciate unions as organizations where you learn."

To build a better South Africa we need strong unions, and these unions should be involved in social struggles.

"Again, from my experience I can conclude that unions gained a lot though struggle during apartheid when they gained their mobilizing skills and post-apartheid where they fought for workers' rights and benefits including minimum and living wages.

"As part of the working class the union has power through its numbers, its social role and in its struggles for social justice. Its campaigns to end the triple crisis of poverty, inequality and unemployment are an example. The union should therefore continue to fight against exploitation and oppression of the workers and for social justice. It should also continue to build national and global solidarity. The union should continue to withhold labour power from capital as it fights for workers.

"Unions should continue to struggle for the society that we want, based on freedom and equality in the communities where we live and at our workplaces.

"This is what will inform my work as an MP. The values that we fight for in the union are also the values that we should fight for in parliament as we serve the same society but in different capacities. This is like wearing a different leadership hat.

"As trade unions, and as politicians with a union background, we all want a better world and to be involved in transforming societies. We are committed to ending the triple crisis of poverty, unemployment and inequality."

What are your comments on gender-based violence and femicide in South Africa?

"The levels of gender-based violence and femicide in South Africa are shocking. Working women are raped and killed in their homes, at workplaces and in the mines. At workplaces women are raped and killed by their male colleagues. Women are also killed by their partners or ex-boyfriends. Children are raped and killed. This is unacceptable and shouldn't be allowed to continue. Therefore, as MPs we are supporting President Cyril Ramaphosa's five-point plan against gender-based violence and femicide. This plan includes prevention, strengthening the criminal justice system, enhancing the legal and policy framework, ensuring adequate care, support and healing for victims of violence and economic empowerment of women.

"As an MP, I am taking this campaign to my constituency and am visiting communities to sensitize them and to get an understanding why this is happening and how we can stop it. We are carrying out this campaign together with various government departments.

"I have been involved in discussions that have been taking place within COSATU structures to deal with gender-based violence, sexual harassment and femicide.

"As SACTWU we have been involved in this campaign for some time now, and through IndustriALL Global Union we have been campaigning for the signing of the IndustriALL Pledge and took part in the recent marches against gender-based violence and femicide in Cape Town."