

While all this was happening, we had decided to do a stage play of Dunlop workers. This was a play in which the Dunlop workers related their experiences while working at this factory. We performed this play to make our wives and children aware of the conditions of the workplace and the disrespectful way in which we were treated. They had the impression that we were well treated at work, well fed and earned a lot of money which we spend on girl friends.

This play also helped to show other workers the pain and misery we faced at Dunlop. It was highly appreciated by worker communities all over South Africa.

In 1983, when the company refused to respond to our demands, we decided to go on strike. We planned to start the strike on Monday. We were having a general meeting on Saturday, where we were to perform our play on the stage for the first time.

Then a lawyer - Mr Cheadle - advised us not to go on strike. We decided we would go back to work and start a go-slow, a canteen boycott, and an overtime boycott. The company had made arrangements because it had spread through the whole factory that the strike was going to happen soon. The company employed many people outside the gate and told them that they must come on Monday when we were going to strike. But

on Monday we entered the gate as usual and we began to do our everyday duties.

Then we noticed that there were many people at the gate with their lunchboxes - some with a half-loaf of bread, some with a quarter, some with Mabewu. We didn't know what was really happening but the company had employed them to replace us when we went on strike. We carried on with our work.

After 3 months there was a big rumour (I think it really happened) that the company was sued by the Department of Manpower. The rumour was saying that the company had to pay R68000 to the Department and to those workers. Some of them had resigned from their jobs because they wanted to work at Dunlop. We often hear people say that the people at Dunlop earn a lot of money. The rumour said that R38000 was for the Department and the rest divided among those workers, who earned big money for doing nothing - all because we didn't go on strike.

After the go slow, the canteen boycott and the overtime boycott many people were dismissed. We disputed that and the union applied for a Conciliation Board (CB) but the company opposed the CB. Then we just kept quiet and carried on with our work.

In 1984 we started wage negotiations demanding 31 cents across the board but the company offered us six cents. We declared a dispute.

There was a man working in the canteen - the induna - who always teased me, saying: "Hey you think you're going to win. This is a giant company. This is the government, you can't overcome this company".

But after we boycotted the canteen a heap of food was dumped. There were high piles taken away and then we dumped some more. We piled a container full of rotten food because the workers didn't buy it anymore. This happened until they decided to close the canteen.

We had planned to strike because of wage negotiations. The workers were very angry because the company had taken our yearly bonus, claiming that the company was in a slump because of our stoppages. So we stopped work.

There was a senior shop-steward, Baba Khanyile, who came to work at 2 o'clock to find the workers in the canteen, on strike. He came in, just looked at the workers and then changed into his overalls and proceeded to work. We asked the workers what we must do? Where is the senior shop-steward? Some workers said: "We saw him going inside the factory, to the department".

Then we sent one of the workers to find him. They found him talking to the managers. He was saying he did not support the strike. Then they came back and reported to us. We asked the workers what we should do. The workers decided to go and fetch him.

I was shocked when I saw him lying on his back, they were carrying him on their shoulders like the comrades carrying their hero on their shoulders on the last day, to the graveside. They dropped him inside the canteen. We asked him why he left us here.

He said: "I was just going to see what was happening inside." So we asked him why he left us without asking what was going on. He was going to work. Then the workers of his constituency said they didn't want him to be a shop steward anymore. I am sure he is an Inkatha official - I know he was a member and after we formed Cosatu he was one of those that didn't come to the Cosatu rally.

After we stopped work the company decided to dismiss us.

At the same time there was the DRIU which was the company's sweetheart. Most of the coloured and Indian workers refused to join Mawu because they said they couldn't join a political organisation inside the company premises. There a few coloureds who joined Mawu. But the day we were fired, all of us were fired, even DRIU members. So they decided to join Mawu.

The workers' policy at Dunlop was: if you had refused to join for a long time then you had to stand in the centre of the work-force and tell them that you have repented; that you have come to join the union; that you realise now that it is time to join. They did that and then we gave them joining forms, cards and did everything we had to.

Then we marched out - we were going to build a new Dunlop factory at St Anthony's where we met every day, from Monday to Friday, early - as if we were going to work. We had to report to our shop steward before 7am.

At the same time we elected a group of workers who were going to be our eyes at Dunlop meetings. After a while they came to be known as the 'special boys'. If a person didn't report the special boys had to fetch him at his home and bring him in to St Anthony's by car. One of the special boys had a kombi and we payed for petrol. There were some people who always came with the special boys, who were trying to dive. We warned them that they shouldn't do this because they were trying to break our unity, that we had decided on this strategy to preserve the unity of the workers.

During the first week and the second week there was no communication between the company and the union. In the third week the personnel manager phoned our organiser to ask him if they could meet at the Royal Hotel. The organiser told him that he had to get a mandate from the workers and that he couldn't come to the Royal Hotel alone. He would have to come with a negotiating team.

The workers gave us a mandate to go to the meeting. We went there and the personnel manager asked if the workers were prepared to come to work. We said: "Yes. The workers haven't got any problem with their work but they want their demands".

They asked if the workers will come back if they respond to the workers' demands. We said: "Yes. They will do so".

That is where we started to negotiate again. They told us that the workers would have to fill in new forms if they came back. They would have to come in as new workers with a new contract and they would loose all their benefits. We said we couldn't accept that but would take it to the workers. They also told us they would suspend twelve workers who were intimidating workers at the company gate.

We said: "No, we can't accept that. We are out for the four people who were dismissed. We can't lose more people". We hadn't done a ballot for the wage negotiations but for the dismissed people - so we stuck to that.

The company hadn't realised that we came out on strike because of the four people - they thought we had forgotten. It had happened in 1983 and it was now 1984.

They made a brief statement and dumped it at St Anthony's. After that the workers said to us, the shop stewards, that we had to stay there with them. That we couldn't go to the company again because the company was not prepared to respond to our demands.

The company phoned the organisers who said the workers had stopped them from coming because the company was not prepared to negotiate faithfully. On the fifth week they called us to negotiate again. We negotiated but came to the deadlock again.

On the seventh week they employed two people from the labour department and gave them four rand each. When they complained that the money was too little the company said it is too much because the job would only take about 30 seconds.

These people came to distribute the pamphlets at St. Anthony's. They were caught by the workers who brought them in to the hall. We asked them where they came from. They told us they were at the labour department when two white guys came and asked if they wanted a job. They said yes, they wanted a job. When they were halfway they were given four rand each, told to distribute the papers and dumped. They distributed the statement that had been rejected by the workers.

We said to them: "OK, you can go. But you must never take a funny job like this again. Sometime the people could kill you. These people, as you see them here, are very angry. These people as you see them here, they are thirsty, they are hungry, they are starving, their children are starving, they are not working because of their bosses that fired them. Now you come with the rubbish statement which they rejected some weeks ago. The company has made fools of you. You must never do it again".

The following day the company telexed the union, saying they wanted a special meeting with the negotiating team. We went to the special meeting. They said: "We agree to these things. The workers must come back. It will be like nothing has happened. There will be no new contract and they won't lose anything. They must come back to their work".

We called it a victory. We planned to come together the following day at St Anthony's where we would discuss how to go back to Dunlop. The next morning our official came and explained what the company was saying. The workers said: "Ja, now we are going back to our work again."

Now the big question was: how were we going to move? We were a large number - about 1500. There were some workers from Dunlop Sport at Mobeni who had joined us. We decided to walk from St Anthony's to Dunlop. We planned to go in fours.

We crossed Old Dutch, we passed the Indian Market in peace, then we crossed Berea. As we were crossing the police came with their vans. They grabbed the first four. I was in the second lot. They put us inside the van. Then all the workers jumped inside the van. They said: "No. We want these people in front only".

We said: "No. These are our leaders. We want to go with them wherever they go, where are you taking them?"

They told us to sit down and forced the other workers to walk past Berea Road and the Technikon. They packed the people into an empty area known as Sparks. The workers started to sing and dance the toi-toi. The senior policeman came and asked what was happening. Bob Marie, the organiser, said: "Your people took the workers and stuck them there". The officer asked where the workers came from.

"These are the strikers of Dunlop," said Bobby, "they are going back to work at Dunlop.

"Ok, let the people go," said the officer, "back to their work".

From then on we didn't walk in order as we had done before. We spread all over the road, singing, coming down Williams Road. There are some women at Dalton Hostel who sell meat, home-made bread and beans with mielies (which we call izinkobe) and inside meat like liver. They were singing with us.

When we joined Sydney Road there were the staff of Dunlop, the clerks, computer people, typists were waving with their doeks, saying: "Come on, come on. Come on, come on". We heard that there was only one day

left before they would have been kicked out, if we hadn't come back to work. We entered the gate and they told us to go our departments. We went to our departments and arranged the starting time for the following day. We were paid our money from the week before we were fired.

Then they said to the negotiating committee: "Now you are back at work. That's fine, we are only going to do one thing. We are going to suspend the twelve who intimidated the people here at the gate".

We reported that to the workers. The workers said: "OK, if the company says that, shop stewards, go and tell them that now we can stay out for about a year. We've got our money, our pockets are full of money. We can solve our problems. Don't worry - we are going back to the forest again at St Anthony's, to use our machines there".

The company decided to drop that. They said they would not suspend the people. We said: "OK, we will work". The following day we started our duty and there was happiness among the people.

The people who had been left behind, the staff like the foremen, couldn't look us in the face. We were happy and we didn't bother with them. We came with the new spirit and the workers were well disciplined. But some of the foremen were really hated because they had been so talkative when we were on strike.

Then there was an animal which the company called intimidation. Sometimes the electricity would just go out, especially at night. Then you would find somebody being beaten up. The union tried to stop that because it helped the company to get a grip on us. We had done a big thing, we had shown the world how we conquered Dunlop - so we shouldn't spoil our victory.

The company tried to sort these people out. One of the senior foreman was intimidated inside the company and pointed out the guy. The company threatened to dismiss him. After we had tried all our means to protect him we decided to strike.

We used the strike we called a 'siyalala la', which means we slept in the company's premises. We refused to leave because the factory belonged to

us. We build it with our sweat and our blood. We lost all our energy to this company and so it belonged to us.

We slept all over the show inside the factory. We used to get up early in the morning, pray, relax again, go for a shower and dance the toi-toi. Then we went to where the container goes to load the tyres and to deliver the things coming from outside, such as raw materials and retreads.

When we came back we noticed that the company was pressurised by the aeroplane tyres because we found heaps of tyres needing to be retreaded lying all over. I don't know how the 'planes use their tyres but I have heard that if, for example, the tyres were fitted at Durban then it could only land at Johannesburg and then perhaps at Cape Town before new tyres have to fitted.

We carried on with our siyalala la strike until the company decided to interdict us. On the day we were supposed to go to court we went back to work.

The works manager went to court. The magistrate said: "I know that we are here to talk about the strike. But I have heard that the workers are back at work. Which is what you wanted to interdict them to do. So I don't know what we will talk about".

The works manager came back very disappointed, asking the production manager why he let the culprits carry on with their work instead of going to court. The production manager said: "They have done what I wanted them to do. The only thing I want is production. I was worried - now I'm OK". Then there was a big fight between them.

One day the senior foreman came late, at 6.15am. He had to put on the lights in the department and start the machines because we were not allowed to do so. When we knocked off we noticed that they had deducted 15 minutes from our time.

When the workers started to grumble, I said: "No. Let's come back tomorrow to meet. That's where we'll demand our time back. If the senior foreman wants production we'll see him tomorrow". The workers agreed and we went home.



On Saturday morning we clocked in. When the foreman arrived we surrounded him and asked why he took 15 minutes from our time. He said he had been ordered to do so by the senior foreman. While we were talking the senior foreman came in. He was working at the mill department and the extruder department (our foreman went to Austria).

I couldn't control myself and said to him: "Ja, when you come to our department, you always come with your nonsense."

He said: "Hey Alfred, you mustn't talk like that to me."

I said: "Yes, you always come with your nonsense. What have you done to our tickets, why have you cut our time?" He was very angry and I was cool.

I said: "I'm still asking that question. Why are you still coming with your nonsense in our department? You do good things in your department and then come and do funny things in our department. What is your problem?"

Then he started to grumble again and the workers started to shout at him. He said: "OK, OK, OK".

He thought the trouble was over and went to his office. He didn't know that it was just the beginning because we despaired after that. All the drivers drove up the ramp to the office where we parked our fork-lift trucks. The rest of the workers were there already. We opened the doors and packed into the office like sardines. It was a very hot day.

I confronted him and said: "Now is the time. We have got two things and you have to choose one. If you want production today you have to give us our 15 minutes back. If you don't we'll go home and we won't give you a second today."

"No. I have done what I have done. I can't change anything. I have cut off 15 minutes because you were late."

"How can you tell us we were late when you were late. We came first. I know I clocked in at ten to six. How can I be late at ten to six?"

"You started work at quarter past."

"That was none of our business. You are the one who came late. You can't tell us that if you are late we are late. But if you want production then give us our time back. If not tell us now because we want to go."

"OK, OK, OK," he said. "I'll go with you today but you must never do it again!"

"Yes, we will never do it again but you must never do it again yourself - because you are the one who has done it first."

Then we left the office and started to work.

That was our experience at Dunlop. Always arguments, always problems. We struggled for everything we had. Nothing came from management to us as a special offer. They always wanted to exploit and in return we got nothing.

Around this time there were also strikes at Bakers Bread and at Clover. We did not stop at organising ourselves but spread our influence down the whole of Sydney Road, as the workers in other factories became organised. The working conditions in these factories were also bad.