

I believe in socialism as the only system which will bring about fundamental change for workers. I do not believe in a system where one person exploits another.

LES KETTLEDAS, NUMSA's National Secretary for Collective Bargaining, talks to Snuki Zikalala

I was born on 11 May 1948 in Johannesburg, but I left the Golden City with my mother at the age of six for Humansdorp, in the Eastern Cape, where I completed my primary education. In 1965, I went to Port Elizabeth and completed my secondary education at Patterson High.

I then worked for a year and half in the chemical laboratory at Bostik, an adhesive factory in Port Elizabeth. In 1968, I moved to General Motors where I stayed until 1974.

First involvement with trade unions

My first involvement with trade unions was in 1968. Although I was still young, it was immediately clear to me that workers were exploited and oppressed as a result of discrimination in employment practises. I joined the National Union of Motor Assembly and Rubber Workers of SA (NUMARWOSA), and was elected as a branch executive member.

In October 1974, I became the branch secretary of the union and later reached the position of national treasurer.

In those early years we were affiliated to the racially-based Trade Union Council of South Africa (TUCSA), but because of that organisation's lack of interest in organising black workers, we disaffiliated from TUCSA in 1976.

Moving to non-racial trade unionism

In the early 1970s the so-called coloured workers' unions were legal in terms of the Industrial Conciliation act, but unions for African workers were illegal. I was one of the people who started organising African workers into unions in 1971, even though it was illegal.

We assisted quite actively in the formation of what was then called the United Automobile Rubber and Allied Workers Union, the African sister union to the so-called coloured union then.

We organised African workers because we believed in non-racialism from the start. It was important for us to have unity of all workers in fighting exploitation and oppression.

However, there were really major problems in those days in organising workers into the unions. Because of fear of dismissals, workers were afraid to associate themselves with the union. We analysed and discussed this problem and were able to convince our workers. We showed them that as individuals they were weak in the face of the employer, and they had to unite with all other workers to be stronger.

From NAAWU to NUMSA

That co-operation and development culminated in the formation of one auto industry union on 26 October 1980. It was possible to merge

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when the legislation was amended, in 1979, allowing black workers to form their own unions, but even before that we were effectively operating with African workers as one union.

Then, through the merging of NUMARWOSA with the United Automobile Rubber and Allied Worker Union and the Western Province Motors Assembly Workers Union, we formed the National Automobile and Allied Workers Union (NAAWU).

In NAAWU, I was elected the regional secretary of the Eastern Cape until I later became a national organiser responsible for the automobile, motor and tyre industries.

In 1991, I became the national secretary responsible for collective bargaining in NUMSA which was formed in 1987 out of a merger of NAAWU, the Metal Allied Workers Union (MAWU), and Motor Industry Combined Workers Union (MICWU).

NUMSA continued to attract a large number of semi-skilled and skilled workers into its ranks. Most of the coloured workers in auto and motor industries have been organised into NUMSA. In the engineering industry, we don't have as many coloured members as we would like.

In recent years, as NUMSA proved its effectiveness in defending workers, we have even been able to recruit some white workers, although as yet not many. We believe that all workers in the industries in which we operate should become members of NUMSA.

From FOSATU to COSATU

During that period of the 1970s, I was also the regional secretary for the Eastern Province for the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU), and later when COSATU was formed I became the acting regional secretary for COSATU until 1987. Those positions were in fact held as honorary and part time positions in addition to my own work within the automobile union.

The strength of FOSATU was that the federation brought together most of the independent unions. In FOSATU, there was tremendous co-operation in the fields of

organising, education and negotiations. During that period there was militancy in the affiliates of FOSATU and that tradition of militancy has been carried through to COSATU.

The job of national negotiator

Some people see national negotiators as being 'caught' between two sets of pressures - from the bosses on one side and from the workers on the other.

I have never seen myself as being caught between the employers and the trade union members. This is because my function primarily is to represent the interests of my members in terms of the mandate that I hold. I fully support the demands for which I have to negotiate, and therefore I cannot see myself in a situation where I must take into consideration the employers' view.

Negotiation is a process. In the final analysis, it is the membership that decides whether to accept what has been negotiated. I would never go back to the workers and ask them to modify their demands because I believe those demands are justified.

We have a practice in the union that negotiators are not empowered to accept and sign agreements on behalf of their members until such time that those agreements have been ratified by the members.

Difficulties of a recession period

The main difficulties that we face in the current recession is that the employers are trying to make us pay for *their* problems. Whether in a recession or even a boom period, employers always refer to our demands as being "unrealistic".

But it is much more difficult for us in circumstances of economic recession to convince them that, even though they may see our demands as unjustified in current economic circumstances, in our view they *are* still justified, taking into consideration the long history of exploitation and oppression that has been going on. We always have difficulties in getting the employers to understand that workers' demands are fully justified.

COSATU has to play a key role

One of the biggest problems that we have in our country today is the growth of unemployment. We in COSATU have to make a serious contribution towards getting the economy to provide for full employment for all working people. The social problems that we are having are being aggravated by unemployment.

As a trade union movement we have to play, and accept to play, a key role in the development of the economy.

As an affiliate of COSATU, we do not accept the unilateral restructuring that is going on at the moment. The campaign to have the National Economic Negotiation Forum established is the right direction. We should continue to push for that, so that we are recognised as a key player within the economy.

I fully support mass action

I fully support the ANC's programmes for mass action. We would ourselves as a trade union engage in industrial action in order to secure our demands if the bosses are stubborn. If there is no real progress in negotiations, then we would be forced to go to our membership, ballot them and determine whether or not they are willing to embark on industrial action. This will secure our demands.

I support the position of the ANC on the Interim Government and the Constituent Assembly. Workers will, I am sure, participate in the programme of mass action so that these demands are met.

At this stage I am not directly involved with any political organisation. I am spending a lot of my time in union activity although I fully support the principles and policies of the ANC. In Port Elizabeth, I was involved in the formation of parent, teacher and student organisations. Because of the intensity of union work one hardly has time to get involved in other activities.

I believe in socialism

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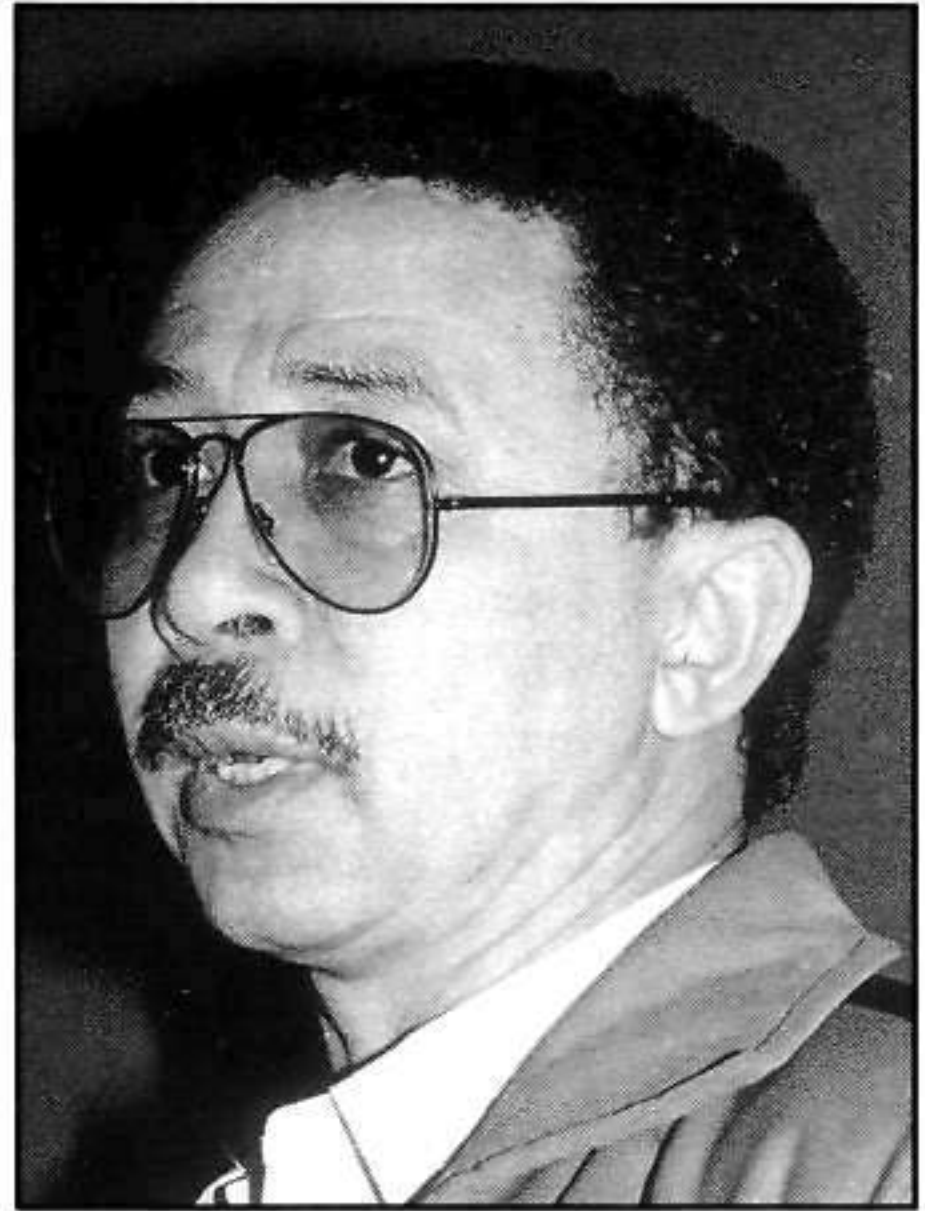


Photo: William Matlala

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I have been to the United States, Britain, Sweden, Japan, Jamaica, Denmark, Holland, Germany and Italy. Certain aspects of the Swedish economic system are appealing to me. It is much better than what we have in South Africa.

Workers in this country have been exploited and oppressed for centuries. The level of unemployment is unacceptable. Hunger, poverty, homelessness, joblessness must be eradicated.

My family, work and leisure

I am married with three kids. The little time that I have, I always try to spend at home in Port Elizabeth. This is particularly at the end of the year when we shut down for about a month. I like to go to Jeffrey's Bay and spend sometime at the sea. I grew up in that area and it reminds me of my youth. I prefer smaller and quiet places.

My favourite sport is rugby. I played it when I was at school. From time to time I watch soccer and tennis, but due to union activity one does not have time to join one of the gym clubs. ☆