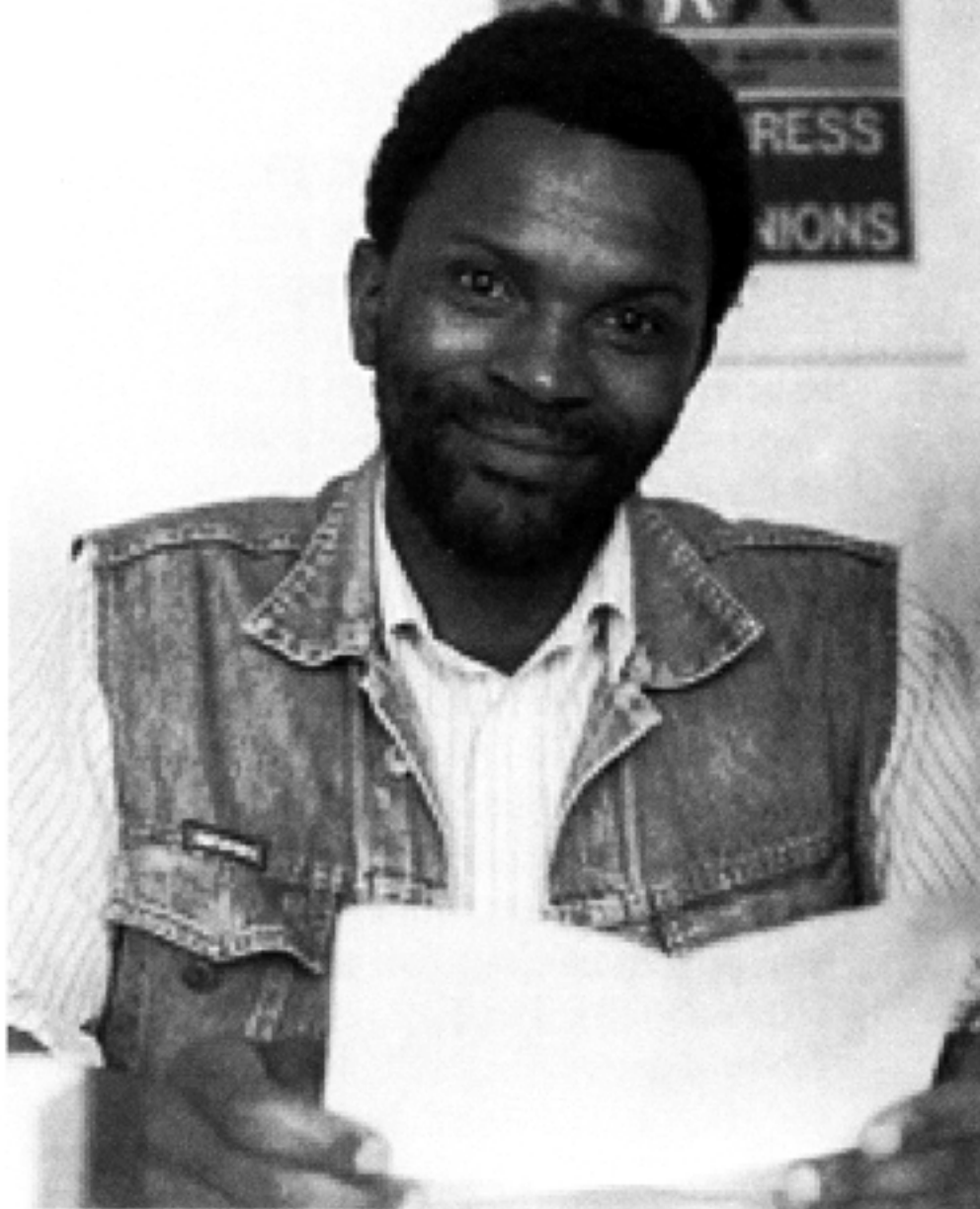


NEHAWU's Vusi Nhlapo:

*President who
dreams of
studying law*



Being a full-time president of the union, I spend a lot of time travelling on union business. Although I drive a Corolla, I love fast cars. It does not have to be expensive, but a modest one that can take me from one place to another at a reasonable time. My work schedule is very tight, I did not even have time to watch the World Cup. I was only able to watch the opening match and the final. Although I am out of touch with the local soccer scene, I have always been a fan of Orlando Pirates despite all its problems. After all, this is my home town team. Ruud Gullit of Holland is my favourite international soccer star. I would have vouched for Maradona, had he not been exposed as a drug addict.

Early life

I was born in Orlando East, on 20 September 1956. I have four brothers and three sisters. My father was a qualified plumber, and my mother a domestic worker. My father used to work for the Administration board and he used to take me with to work on school holidays. I noticed how he was being exploited. His white supervisors used to make him do odd jobs at their houses.

We used to stay in a two-roomed house with a bedroom and a kitchen. The kitchen was a bit bigger and we divided it into two, with the other part serving as a sitting room. All the children slept in this sitting room. But it was not only us children who slept in the sitting room. There were aunts and

cousins who came to stay from time to time. They would say they were coming to stay for a week, but this became extended stays and they would stay a month, two months or even longer.

Schooling history

I attended school at Emthonjeni primary in Orlando, and then proceeded to Orlando North secondary. Orlando North was sponsored by Anglo-American as part of the company's social responsibility programme. But the school became highly politicised as it had teachers like Aubrey Mokoena, who were activists.

I then proceeded to Madibane High, which was very isolated from other schools at the time and the teachers exercised strict discipline on students. Although I was not involved in student politics, I was however, politically aware. My father had recently passed away, and as the eldest son, my mother looked up to me to provide for the family. I therefore wanted to complete my schooling and proceed to find work to support my family. I told myself that getting involved in student activities would land me in jail. This put me on bad terms with some of my peers, because they wanted me to get involved in student politics.

I remember on 15 June 1976 when we were forced to join a protest march. I had left home as usual to go to school, and was wearing my school uniform and carrying books. Many of us did not know that there was a march planned. We did not go to assembly that morning, and there was a lot of tension in the air. When we arrived at school, we were told that there would be a march. It felt like one was in a different world. Other students were already demonstrating in the school premises and we had to join in the march.

Work history

My first job was as a clerk and insurance salesman at Metropolitan Homes Trust Life in 1977. I worked there until 1980 when I was retrenched. I then joined Checkers as a stock counting clerk. This was a new department and we were paid more than all

the other workers who had been there longer than us. I worked there for one year and was retrenched again when the department was closed. I was unemployed for nearly three years, doing odd jobs here and there.

In 1984 I was employed at Wits University laboratory in the zoology department. When I filled in employment forms, there was another form of the Black University Workers Association. As a desperate job seeker, I filled that one in too, and was informed that R1 would be deducted from my wages for the association. In a way, it was some kind of condition of employment to belong to BUWA. Almost all black workers at the university were also members of the association.

After working for some time at the laboratory, my title was changed to that of laboratory technician. I did not have any formal training for this, it was mostly an on-the-job training. Anyway, the university is very exploitative of its workforce, in a sense that when they realise that you have gained experience in some form of work, they will change your title and give you more responsibilities. But they never improve your salary alongside the extra responsibilities you are given.

Joining the union

In 1986, some workers started organising for the General and Allied Workers Union (GAWU) at work. Although most of us were members of BUWA, including those who were organising for GAWU, we signed up for GAWU. Our aim in joining GAWU was to cripple and eventually kill the association. Although most of us resigned from BUWA after joining GAWU, our aim of killing the staff association did not succeed. This is because other workers still remained members of BUWA and refused to join GAWU.

There was a vote conducted among university workers to determine which organisation should represent them. GAWU won the majority of votes, and the university started negotiations with it for a recognition agreement. Most of us then started resigning from the association after GAWU won the

vote. After a while, I was elected a shopsteward for GAWU. This was the start of my active involvement in trade unionism.

In 1987, GAWU merged with two other unions to form NEHAWU, in keeping with COSATU's principle of one union in one industry. Before the merger, we had problems with people who still held dual membership of GAWU and the staff association.

Leading NEHAWU

In 1992, I was elected first vice president of NEHAWU. At that time, the union was very disorganised and had a lot of problems. There was basically no co-ordination or team work amongst the office bearers, and morale among staff members was very low.

When the 1992 strikes happened, we took a decision that national office bearers need to co-ordinate these at head office level.

As we had no resources in the regions, and the president and second vice president at the time were based outside of the PWV area, I started working full-time in the union, with the major responsibility of leading negotiations in the strike and putting coherence into the office bearers strategy.

Things in the union started changing in 1993. A new team of office bearers took over when I was elected president. We started reorganising the union, by instilling a new culture of co-operation. The office bearers started working together as a team. We embarked on branch visits to give our members a sense of belonging in their union.

The strikes that happened in the health sector, for example, gave NEHAWU a high profile. Unorganised workers within the sector started joining the union in greater numbers. This also increased COSATU's profile within the public sector through our union.

NUM the inspiration

NUM has always been a source of inspiration. Through the leadership of Cyril Ramaphosa, they took on the powerful mining bosses in the mineworkers strike of 1987. NUM still evokes great pride in me about trade unionism in this country.

At the moment, I concentrate my efforts

full-time on union work. However, I am still on the university's books as an employee. When I am no longer a president of the union, I will still have a job to go back to.

My union work leaves me little spare time. I am married and have two children, aged 17 and 11 years. For example, I can no longer take my children to movies or help them with their school work. That has put me in a bad spot with them.

Regrets

I have two regrets in my life. The one is that I did not pursue my second option of becoming a lawyer, seeing that I could not become an architect. The second is that our political situation did not turn out to be a revolution we all thought it would be. This places us in a difficult position of how do we deal with our comrades who are cabinet ministers. Especially for us in the public sector, we are not sure whether these ministers are responsible to the ANC or to the government of national unity.

I still dream of studying law one day. ☆



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