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**Interviewer:** It's the 17<sup>th</sup> November 2010 and I'm interviewing Simon, Simon thanks for making time.

**Mthembu:** Pleasure.

**Interviewer:** Just to start off with Simon, a little few things about yourself. Where and when were you born?

**Mthembu:** I was born in Soweto, in Orlando East some 64 years back, in 1946.

**Interviewer:** Have you lived in Soweto pretty much all your life?

**Mthembu:** All my life, I am a Sowetan

**Interviewer:** Born and bred. Tell us a little bit about your family - what kind of family did you come from, brothers, sisters?

**Mthembu:** A big family, a family of seven - six boys and one girl, the girl being the last born of the family. My brothers passed away and a sister, we are three now from a family of seven. Both my parents passed away as well. I'm presently in charge of our family house - it's in my name now.

**Interviewer:** What about your schooling? Tell us a little bit about your schooling.

**Mthembu:** I went up to matric. I couldn't go to varsity due to the fact that I didn't have a sponsor who was going to take me up educationally but I'm thinking of going back to school, I'm thinking of next year. I'm thinking of getting myself this political science project. That is the route I'm thinking of going to.

**Interviewer:** Just tell me a little bit about your work history.

**Mthembu:** I worked for most companies mostly as a clerk. I started with Fox Lifters and later changed to Kivico, then from Kivico I went to a shipping company called Mico Shipping. I had various jobs there in the clerical division until we were retrenched in 1992. By then I was politicised and I was a shop steward so that's where the tiff came about because we challenged management about certain clauses, certain laws, certain processes concerning the company. So they identified us as problem makers and closed that department. It was a very funny way of getting rid of us - they said this department is no longer productive whereas that department consisted mainly of unionised people so they choose their favourites amongst us and they put them in other companies that are being run by the very same company. So that's when I stopped working formally, well I wouldn't say about informal work it comes now and then.

**Interviewer:** Since 1992?

**Mthembu:** Since '92.

**Interviewer:** You mentioned that at that stage you became politicised, how did you become politicised? What was the process when you entered into that world of struggle and the political?

**Mthembu:** Basically I used to see what is happening around me, identify the problems and be interested in solving some of the problems. And we started attending meetings where we were briefed as how to fight some of these fights and luckily for me I'm happy I got to know Trevor Ngwane, he played a very big role in politicising me. That time I was with Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee, so that's where my political instincts were sharpened.

**Interviewer:** Just tell me a little bit about the SECC ... it was formed in the late 1990s, what was it 1999?

**Mthembu:** The year 2000.

**Interviewer:** The year 2000 ... so did you pretty much come on board the year it was formed or soon thereafter?

**Mthembu:** On its formative year cause I remember I got a pamphlet from Virginia, she is the one who recruited me and then I went to their meeting at Career Centre, that's where it was launched, that's where it was introduced, I was there.

**Interviewer:** And you quickly became fairly involved in the SECC, right?

**Mthembu:** Ya to my surprise I was first made the secretary and in the second year I thought maybe I might return my position only to find that they had another position for me for being deputy to Trevor Ngwane and he didn't take kindly to that because he had his own people so I was a bit of a threat to him. So the third year I was made the Treasurer of the SECC - that's when I decided after the AGM that went wrongly to resign. That's when the idea of forming the SCR came and we spoke to some comrades, then it was launched.

**Interviewer:** As briefly as you can, I know it's quite an involved story, just identify what it was that led to a group of breakaway individuals to form the SCR?

**Mthembu:** Basically pride was involved; the element of owning the organisation, the organisation was this individual. He had a way of running this organisation according to his own specific standards and when we questioned them he didn't take kindly to that. That's when we said why don't we leave this organisation seeing that it's this individual's organisation and form an organisation that will be controlled by the people on the ground so that was the idea of the SCR.

**Interviewer:** Up until that point, in terms of the SECC it was one of the first community members of the APF, right? By the time that split happened and SCR was formed what year was that?

**Mthembu:** 2005, May 11.

**Interviewer:** It's almost five years that you've been part of the SECC - just tell me of the time when you were in the SECC how you perceived the relationship of the community organisation and what the APF was all about?

**Mthembu:** The first challenge we had was to affiliate to APF as you know it took us eighteen months for APF to take us on board. As you know there was so much politics and APF didn't want us and Trevor played a very big role in trying to influence people not to allow us into the

APF cause at that time he was the organiser and then he asked a very probing question, he said, 'these people come from SECC they formed the SCR and if they have a problem do you think I as Trevor Ngwane will sort the problem for them because I still want them back they must come back home.' So it went up until people were forced to vote whether to take us as APF affiliates or not - as I said it took us 18 months. Thereafter they didn't have any choice. The majority said, we know these people, we've been struggling with them and that's why we came on board.

**Interviewer:** When the SCR was formed what was the difference between the SCR and the SECC other than the individual leadership?

**Mthembu:** We shared the very same campaigns like the electricity campaign, water, evictions, our campaigns were similar but we put an emphasis in making our members feel this is their organisation as opposed to 'Simon Mthembu is the Chairperson, whatever he says goes'. No, we were out with that. We attracted a lot of people some of them from the SECC, they had grudges with Trevor we said okay. We accepted them, but we concentrated on making SCR viable by having many members and we did that up to the time where we had some problems later on in life.

**Interviewer:** How was the SRC structured in terms of its own organisational structure? By that I mean were there specific leaders and elections, was it formally structured in that sense?

**Mthembu:** Ya it was formally structured because we have a Constitution and our Constitution demands that every year we must have an AGM and then we kept that. And then we structured it to cater for the elderly, the young, the workers and non workers - that's why we visited a lot of places getting ideas from people on the ground on the type of organisation they want to belong to. So it was more like finding out from people what their aspirations were and how best can we serve them.

**Interviewer:** You mentioned that when SRC was formed a large portion of your membership was elderly people and pensioners - was that for a specific reason or was that the areas you were mobilising in?

**Mthembu:** No, how it came about is that most of these pensioners are house owners. Those are the people who are having problems and they will come to us and we must see to it that we help them because; like in Orlando East the township was built in 1932 so you can imagine. The surviving house holders they felt threatened when there were problems of evictions and then they came to us and we attracted the youth because we have a youth wing as well so that we must push the struggle.

**Interviewer:** Soweto is a very well known place for many reasons obviously, historically and otherwise. How would you describe the constituency in which SRC begun to mobilise? How would you describe the class composition and the political composition of that constituency?

**Mthembu:** Politically we were strong because affiliates of APF they help us in so many things and they help us to identify our struggle and to check which relevant things we can struggle against. It helped; the class didn't matter because we are saying in our organisation education is not the first thing people should have. Most of our members are not educated.

As elderly people some have never been to school so we must talk a language that they will understand, get to their fears and challenges and try and sort them out. We got so popular that the ANC got jealous - they labelled me so many names because they could see that we have a very strong constituency on the ground. I was called popcorn - whatever that means, I was called opposition and I kept on telling them that your organisation is DA not me and you're just a sick body. What we are doing was supposed to be done by the civic association but somewhere down the line they didn't take up the struggle, they chose to go on the armpit of the ANC and we came on very strongly and we prevented evictions, whatever struggle we took we made it a point that people should identify with us.

**Interviewer:** You said the vast majority of SRC members were home owners, was there any mobilisation within backyarders, shack settlements or anything like that as well?

**Mthembu:** We deliberately excluded the shack dwellers

**Interviewer:** Why so?

**Mthembu:** Because they did not own houses, our struggle was with people who own houses because you are not guaranteed that this person in your house will be with you for years and years. Okay, he will find another place and move on but our problems were the same. For instance this 'R5 campaign – take it or leave it' we said we are not going to include shack dwellers or people who were hiring because we are saying to the owner don't pay for electricity, don't pay for services because the only amount we can afford per month is R5 because we don't owe these people, they owe us. We identified that there was going to be a problem, indeed there was a problem when the shack dwellers, some of them are using our yards for their shacks they came to us and they started saying 'how can you say the landlords should only pay R5 whereas these people are charging us R200/R300 per month for rental and my answer to that was that whatever they charge you is a private agreement between you and them, no one is forcing you to stay at that place. If he said my rental is going to be so much you agreed that's why you're at his place, we are not covering you in this campaign we are only covering house owners.

**Interviewer:** You mentioned that the APF assisted in many ways. Can you give some specific examples of how membership in the APF was beneficial or not ...the good and the bad with regards to an organisation which had 30 different communities as part of it and took up issues on broader level.

**Mthembu:** It was beneficial for instance if we want to hold a march we would approach the APF and they will push for us to get permission and they will help us with transport and the like and that actually helps because as a big organisation with many members. I remember at one time we filled eight buses when we went to a march and we left many comrades behind - now that clearly shows that people identified with SCR. Now APF besides that, they sharpened our political outlook, what is happening locally and overseas for instance we take this Coalition against Water Privatisation that opened our eyes about the privatisation of water and the lunch of CAX [Coalition against Xenophobia] we were part of it and we were very supportive of it.

**Interviewer:** In many ways the SCR like what happened in the SECC previously run into some organisational problems later on, just describe what some of those problems, some of

those challenges were in an organisation like the SCR. What were the reasons there and how did/did not membership of the APF help to resolve that?

**Mthembu:** Mostly our problems I will say was greed, greed played a very big part and dishonesty as well, people fighting for positions, people being jealous of other people's progress so that sort of put a damper on things. These are the sort of problems that cracks up here and there but I wouldn't want to say personal problems between me and my wife but that as well contributed negatively to the SRC. As it is, it's still divided there are people who are with me, there are people who are against me, things like that but I'm working on it.

**Interviewer:** How did that play itself out in your membership in relation to the APF because there were quite a lot of processes that were attempting to deal with that situation?

**Mthembu:** APF tried to address our issue but they didn't go the whole mile. They were not firm enough and they left it to other affiliates to come up with a plan. As you know affiliates didn't respond positively, they had their own agenda others were trying to help, others were trying to destroy so that is the sort of problem that we encountered within the APF.

**Interviewer:** You mentioned that as the SCR you took up similar campaigns with the SECC on the basic services issues and what else? If you were to look at when you started all this SRC and the goals of the organisation now five years later and where things are what would be your assessment?

**Mthembu:** Five years down the line we achieved so many good things for the mere fact that you get overseas people who are coming this side who want to interview you that clearly shows that we have arrived as an organisation and we earned our campaigns from what we had as SECC. For instance, the R5 campaign for electricity and water is not a campaign for the SECC as you know it was started by us and evictions we took a very strong stand that we try and stop evictions though that campaign it was pursued by SECC as well because that's where we sharpened our knowledge about these evictions. And we said no, we must fight that because basically what we sat and discussed as SCR was that if we operate in a township obviously our campaigns will link with the SECC, let us not take them as opposition let us take them as an extension. Where they fail to fight for something then we will be around to correct that so as it is I don't regard them as part of our enemies, its part of the struggle, the struggle goes on and unity is strength.

**Interviewer:** In the process of the struggles that you took on as the SCR over the last five years what kind of tactics did you use to engage?

**Mthembu:** Ya we used various tactics. Firstly we tried to get these people around the table and discuss with them when opportunities arises but as you know with government they are not interested in talking, they wanted to impose their will on us. And we started to be aggressive and that actually helped as well so when we marched we made it a point that we forcefully put our views across, its either you do that or you don't do it and we even threatened to burn their cars if they don't want to change from what there are doing. But our main opposition so far is the ANC, they didn't take kindly to our marches because we were attacking their so-called leaders - Amos Masondo - as you know in 2001 we went to his house, we got arrested and all that so the ANC didn't take kindly to that so they see us, particularly me, they hate my guts but then you cannot please everyone.

**Interviewer:** Other than marches what kind of tactical means did you use to try to advance struggle - there are many different things that one can do, we don't just march – so what were the other kinds of things?

**Mthembu:** Getting into discussion with these people, try and sit down with them, try and make them understand what was happening around the locations especially the elderly people - why are they so concerned that their houses are being taken off on them? Like this Soccer World Cup 2010 - so many of elderly people lost their houses to these unscrupulous councillors. They sold their houses; people improved their houses they ended up being bed and breakfast houses. Now there is one particular incident, I was so touched I remember they took a house from an elderly person in Diepkloof, the councillor was involved in the selling of that house and the guy who was buying that house for his mother is a lawyer and then he got into a heated argument with him and I caught this; I said 'if you say you bought this house do you know this old lady?' and he said 'no I don't'. And then I said to him, 'where did you buy the house from because this is the owner of that house and if you don't know this lady then you must have bought that house from someone else'. And then when we questioned him it was revealed that he bought the house from the daughter in law of the old lady. She is the one who sold the house and she sold the house for R10 000 and I said people must be mad where have you seen a house worth R10 000 nowadays? So that got us into an argument and happily it had a happy ending because today that old lady is still in a house. I put my foot down and said she is not going anywhere until I see a court order or an eviction order as long as I don't see those two she is not moving out. Up to now she is still in that house and you can just imagine thereafter people came to flock to join us because they saw that we are helping the community.

**Interviewer:** When I was asking about the assessment you mentioned a couple of things - do you think the tactics you employed have had a desired impact in people's lives? You said that you had programme goals and you look at them and you had an impact ... what sort of impact has that been?

**Mthembu:** Mostly the impact was positive except that we lost some very serious cases because you cannot win them all. We were let down by lack of knowledge, how to challenge these things or which lawyers to turn to so that they may help. But then if you say like we are saying go to Wits Law School you find people who are not qualified there, its internship they are doing there, they are training and they don't know the vast majority of what is happening with these cases. Now you send someone there thinking that person is going to be helped but that person comes back without being helped. So lack of knowledge, who to attend to again because the APF used to help us in such instances where they used to recommend people go and see so-and-so who will help you and we do that as well.

**Interviewer:** In the process of a lot of the struggles and the cases that were taken up as part of the SRC activities, what was the general response or the specific instances of the response from the state? In other words, response from the government as opposed to the ANC particularly ...?

**Mthembu:** The government up to now them do not take kindly our struggle on the ground because we are exposing their comrades who are in charge that they are not doing their jobs. Particularly now if you were to see the state of corruption it's amazing and nepotism is

there and now what we have discovered is that if you are not good at this they take you they deploy you to another division hoping that you'll do better only to find that you are doing worse. The response by the state they didn't take kindly to us because we exposed them and that didn't go down well with them.

**Interviewer:** Practical responses? In other words, with security forces in terms of activities in particular?

**Mthembu:** What actually helped us is the Freedom of Expression Campaign. They taught us if you want to march what should be happening because what was a challenge to us is the Gatherings Act. You'll find that the police are blank about the Gathering's Act they do not know it, if you apply for a gathering, if you apply for a march they take it as if you want to overturn the status quo you want to fight the government whereas it's your right. We ended up teaching the police about the Gatherings Act, that it's our right to march and it's in the Constitution ... so that sort of helped us know our rights. Because mostly what I have identified with people on the ground as I'm saying now and then in our meetings is that people are not aware of their rights and that is why they are being victimised because if a person comes wearing a suit and says this house is being sold that you must move out we give you a week to move out they won't challenge that, they comply. So that is the problem - we are still teaching them about their rights but gradually as older people they understand now that no one will come to your house and tell you what to do, fight for your rights.

**Interviewer:** Would you consider that quite an important thing that possibly the biggest achievement is from people themselves to become confident and knowledgeable in order to struggle against these state forces ... that are trying to take an advantage of them?

**Mthembu:** Another thing that helps us in our meeting is that we have this item called political discussion before we start our meetings. We try to talk about things that people see on TV or read in the papers, about what is going on in the world. So in a way we are conscientising them about what is happening. For instance, our members when you say to them what is the situation in Zimbabwe they will tell you because we report as is, in Zimbabwe there is this problem and there is this problem, what is the cause of the problem and they will come back home, here is government installing pre paid meters and these pre paid meters are going to damage us financially because we didn't agree to these things they forced them on us. We talk about such things and gradually they understand that such things are illegal. So if something is illegal you've got to find a way of fighting those things.

**Interviewer:** You mentioned you're being exposed to international things which I'm assuming in most cases was through APF linkages with other movements ...?

**Mthembu:** Ya it was through APF. That's why APF is so important - we feel that we mustn't move away from the APF because they've got a struggle both locally and internationally. We know for a fact they have even sent some comrades overseas, Virginia for instance used to go to all these other places so that was broadening outlook on politics. So this side as well, I was sent to various places through APF and I got to understand the politics in Swaziland what is happening there, in Zimbabwe, Malawi, things like that.



**Interviewer:** I'm asking this two part question' one, SCR and two, APF. What would you describe as the main strengths and weaknesses of the SCR if you are looking at its formation and now the present situation?

**Mthembu:** Lies and disunity among the executive, people who've got their own secret agendas. People who will hate you for being famous because they cannot match that so they turn negative towards you and same applies to the APF. You see comrades doing funny things; they end up stealing from the APF and the SCR. Their excuse will be that these comrades are not working. That doesn't tell them to steal computers, to steal laptops because they are not working ... when I wanted people to account then I will sit on their backs and they do not like me. I'm happy I'm out of that, they did what they did but I'm very clean I was never part of that.

**Interviewer:** SCR was one of the few APF affiliates that managed to receive its own funding. How did that impact on the organisation?

**Mthembu:** It impacted very positively because in a way we were now able to do whatever we wanted to advance our struggle because money is very important in a struggle. For instance, if you are thinking of a march the bus issue will come in, some campaigns will need workshops, they will send different people to different workshops so that when they come back they are empowered and they teach other people as well, so it is important.

**Interviewer:** Did it have any negative impacts?

**Mthembu:** Ya there was a negative impact. Comrades wanted to get hold of this money by crook. They would say we need so much for these campaigns only to find out that those campaigns are not being done, money is being withdrawn from the bank and it ended up in some individual's hands, its gone.

**Interviewer:** Tell me with SCR, one of the things that some comrades experienced, I don't know whether it's the case with the SCR, as a result of their membership with the APF ... was the SCR able to establish relationships with a range of other organisations, other NGOs both here and even abroad?

**Mthembu:** Yes we have but unfortunately for comrades from abroad out contact was limited because we didn't have computers at that time. We couldn't communicate with them the way we wanted to communicate but when they came over we linked, we pushed our struggles. I remember at one stage comrades from France representing the TV station Channel De Vous, they visited us at our branch meeting in Diepkloof and we took them to the location, we explained to them how we dismantle the electricity pre paid because there were some houses which were without electricity and we went to connect so they were surprised and they took photos. Coming back locally, our struggles we still need a very strong layer of leaders, people who are above these petty things, pilfering and all that but you've got to understand that if you are dealing with people who are unemployed you get all these funny things happening but we are trying to address that challenge. But linkages with other social movements its been done through APF. If and when comrades from other organisations invite us we go there, we attend and give them moral support. As it is I'm from this SECC march.

**Interviewer:** How important do you think it was both for individuals and organisations within the SCR to be exposed to other community struggles, to understand similarities and conditions and other things outside their own world and communities?

**Mthembu:** It brought knowledge because at any given moment you know what is happening in the world for instance, what is happening overseas, what are their struggles, what are they fighting for. And it helps again to read newspapers and watch TV this is what I'm telling my family that my favourite programme is the news, because I get so much from the news. I must be alert about what is happening around me so that sort of broadens your mind as well.

**Interviewer:** How, if at all, do you think the political shifts in the ANC and the country over the last two years has affected struggles on the ground, people's ideas about their politics and what they are struggling for? And the change with Zuma and all these other things, how has that impacted on the programmes and struggles in a place like Soweto?

**Mthembu:** Government will always give us a mean sheet to fight because they have got so many mistakes all we have to do is capitalise on their mistakes. Well the change of faces from Mbeki to Zuma is just a strategy even Zuma is not as nice as he professes to be so we as struggling comrades on the ground. I remember one organisation told me, you know what you people should be doing is look at the ANC government see their blunders and capitalise on their blunders because there is this corruption, they cannot do this, they cannot rule the country in the way it should be ruled. So if you go in there and fight you will make an impact and this is what we are planning to do, we haven't done it but I'm focused now that if we get another strong layer of comrades who are coming from the ground we can sort of improve our struggles on the ground.

**Interviewer:** Would you say that since the SCR was formed the socio-economic conditions of your members has gotten better or worse or stayed more or less the same?

**Mthembu:** We are attracting new members, we are attracting new members

**Interviewer:** No I mean the socio-economic conditions, the things that you're struggling for, if you look and say okay this is the five years we've been in operation, what would you say is better and what you would say is worse?

**Mthembu:** We have some achievements and we have some disappointments as well. What we've achieved is unity with the community and a sense of identifying with like-minded people. But what is to our advantage it's not that vested in politics so there are other forms of entertainment other than politics that's why we are attracting elderly people. So if only youth could make a point to take part in some struggles we will push the struggle forward and government will have to take in of us. Last time I was challenging the councillors from Orlando, I said 'guys why don't you come down to us and talk to us because it doesn't mean that because I'm a member of the SCR I'm your enemy but if there are challenges we've got to meet, let us join hands'. On the 25<sup>th</sup> of this month we will be having a march against the installation of pre paid electricity in our area, the councillors called a meeting - others went to that meeting. I'm very happy that I went to that meeting because I ended up addressing that meeting and people gave me a lot of support and we pushed that and said lets go to Eskom and tell them that we cannot have these prepaid meters they are putting by force because right now in my area they are putting them by force. And what is disturbing is that Eskom has

hired a private security company and those people are coming with guns so how can you invite people with guns because we've told them that Eskom didn't discuss this thing with us and its going ahead to put it without our say. So the councillors promised that they will be part of that march on the 25<sup>th</sup> , so I'm interested to see if we will be laughing side by side with councillors.

**Interviewer:** Given all the things that we have talked about that is some of the achievements, weaknesses, strengths what would you characterise as the main role now and in the foreseeable future for a community organisation like SCR?

**Mthembu:** The future is in the hands of community organisations as opposed to the government. We should be strengthening these movements on the ground because people identify with them. People have lost trust in the government because the promises they were promised up to now they haven't come through for them - a better life for all. We ask people 'where is this better life for all; 'are you experiencing this better life for all?' And personally I will tell you I'm one person who does not belong to any political party. Come next year I won't be voting because I don't know what I'll be voting for. I even challenge them that okay, I know you are card carrying members of political parties, I know that you go and vote but before you even put a cross there think yourself firstly what will your vote change, how is it going to empower me? If you don't even answer don't even write anything just go out of the voting station because you don't know why you went there in the first place or alternatively you make a spoilt ballot like we are always doing to show that you are like all these people, you cross all that spaces of the ballot paper and put it there or alternatively you write a message 'where is this better living for all we are still waiting for it', so that will send a message to government that people are still fed up on the ground.

**Interviewer:** So what you are essentially saying is that it is more important than ever to build and mobilise at the community level?

**Mthembu:** That's the only thing that we should be doing – mobilise, mobilise, mobilise. The knowledge that we have impacted on members on the ground is that they should be empowered because they don't know their rights.

**Interviewer:** Is there anything that I haven't asked you about SRC in particular or struggles on the ground that you would like to say, that we haven't talked about?

**Mthembu:** No you have covered everything. Remember when we started I said I don't want to personalise issues, I won't go into that detail but it affected me greatly. But I'm dealing with it. Other than that I see a bright future for SCR and some other organisations that are fighting on the ground and my only wish is that we must combine our struggles, fight as one unity is strength that way we will conquer whatever we are faced with

**Interviewer:** Thanks very much Simon.

**Mthembu:** You're welcome.