

## **EULOGY FOR PRESIDENT REUBEN TJAITJAI**

Program Director Mr. Muzi Mthabela, Abafundisi, Mrs. Tjaitjai, children of comrade President, his brothers, and a sister, and all family members,

Detawu battalion led by the deputy president comrade Nigel Fortune, SAFTU leadership led by the General Secretayr comrade Zwelinzima Vavi, and leaders from various SAFTU affiliates,

Employer representatives led by sesi Molebogeng Moleke the Employee Relations Director and all colleagues of the late comrade President Reuben

Friends, comrades, community members, and all protocols observed.

I know very well that losing a loved one and a father is undoubtedly one of the most difficult experiences we face in life, during this time it can be challenging to find the right words to express emotions and pay proper tribute to the memory of the departed.

I am reminded of one line in the play by Julius Caesar, written by Shakespeare when Mark Antony at Caesar's funeral said.

**Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears; I come here to bury Caesar; not to praise him. The evil that men do lives after them, the good is often interred with their bones.**

It is my singular honour and privilege to deliver this eulogy about a man of comrade Reuben's caliber and stature, we gather to honor the memory of a truly remarkable individual - President Reuben Tjaitjai.

In a world where integrity often seems elusive, Comrade Tjaitjai stood as a shining example of honesty and moral courage.

He leaves behind no trace of accusation against any form of corruption or dodgy deals, a real product of the working class, a brave, dependable, and reliable confidante. To us, he was an honest man.

In an era where corruption and deceit too often dominate the headlines, comrade President Tjaitjai's name stands untarnished, free from any accusation or suggestion of wrongdoing.

Even though we know that all good things come to end at some point including life itself we never in our wildest dreams imagined ourselves speaking about comrade President Reuben in the past tense.

There are no words that can express our pain, we are devastated, to say the least.

I say without any fear of contradictions that Comrade Tjaitjai was a born leader. The son of a farm worker.

He only had five years of schooling and yet he was able to make his presence felt in boardrooms where he represented the Union on behalf of its members.

Comrade President Reuben had a first-hand experience of the cruelty of apartheid and capitalism as he became a farm worker at the tender age of 17.

At the age of 21 years, he left home in search of better work opportunities in what is popularly known as the City of Gold, at some point in his life he became a taxi driver to earn a living.

He did not read and research about class exploitation and the brutality of the system, he is the real product of the working class baptized deep in the trenches.

He understood the antagonistic nature of the class struggle and the competing interests between workers and employers. More than that, he valued and understood the importance of unity among workers.

My first direct encounter with him I vividly remember that it was over the phone in 2016 in the evening at about 21h30 I was on my way from Harris Smith from a meeting at a company called Maluti Bus Service to negotiate a recognition agreement.

He asked me about DETAWU and that they were looking for a Trade Union after they had some serious challenges with their Union, SATAWU and they were keen to join DETAWU but they wanted more information about the Union first as a new Union.

We set up an urgent meeting the following day to take our discussion forward and indeed he showed up for the meeting as agreed.

Without exaggeration, in less than 2 minutes in our meeting, I was not only convinced but revolutionary excited that DETAWU had secured itself a grounded soldier, a volunteer that was purely driven by the desire to ensure that workers remain organised under a credible Union.

Right there he asked for at least 300 membership forms and he committed to return the forms to the office within a fortnight, I could not believe it but I complied with the request nonetheless.

He did not even ask me to join them to drive the recruitment campaign on the ground, he spearheaded it without asking for a cent for traveling as some usually do.

He together with his colleagues some of whom are present here today, fearlessly embarked on an intense recruitment drive which was sometimes politically

sabotaged because there were clear signs that the employer was siding with the previous Union.

DETAWU was branded as the Union of Askaries, a Union that would be very difficult to work with, an unreasonable Union.

In less than 2 weeks the forms were coming back and he was already telling me about other potential memberships in his sector outside his company.

He was the organiser of note with exceptional skill to spot potential members and explore the fertile ground.

When the Company wanted to deny us organisational rights including access to the workplace, he strategically quickly mobilised workers and threatened the employer with work stoppage because the employer was interfering with their constitutional right to belong to a Union of their choice.

When I heard this through the organiser I said to myself this comrade is a gem.

Before I knew it the employer had already retreated and granted DETAWU all the rights including the right to elect shop stewards.

Comrade President was the worker's darling, he was the first to be elected as a shop steward. The rest is history now.

He continued to drive recruitment in the Union till his last days. When he was discharged from the hospital early this year the first thing he did was go to the Union Head Office to collect a new bag and membership forms which he never used because soon he was readmitted to hospital again.

I am certain that there is no General Secretary who could not envy to work with a President of his character. I was happy to serve with him and to be under his leadership because he understood that the unity of an organization as young as DETAWU was sacrosanct.

A few steps back, although comrade President Reuben's rise up the ranks of the Trade Union movement was not conventional, he fitted like a glove in the leadership. For the most part, Comrade President's route up the ranks of the Trade Union movement was via the road freight sectorial structures.

He first joined the defunct Transport and General Workers Union in the early 1990s. His natural leadership abilities shone through even then, and he was elected as a shop steward in 1994.

The recognition of his leadership qualities become a recurring theme throughout his union activism.

In 1996 he joined a division of Imperial Logistics but was unfortunately retrenched in 1998, as a consequence of a

strike he was involved in the year before.

It was during this time that he spent a year working as a taxi driver. I am sure anyone familiar with comrade President Tjatjia's calm demeanor wonders how he survived a whole year in the taxi industry,

I used to tease him, comrade president are you sure you were once a taxi driver because you do not have what it takes to be a taxi driver? He would laugh me off and say you do not know comrade GS.

Once upon a time, at one SAFTU NEC meeting myself and another NEC member had a bit of a heated exchange almost on the verge of throwing feats at each other. He just set quietly unmoved, and when I got back to my seat next to him I furiously said to him what kind of a taxi driver are you, that your GS is almost beaten up and you do not even raise a finger.

He politely said comrade GS ungayijahi impi, and we both laughed out loud in a meeting.

In 1999, the Tjaitjai's return to the Road Freight Industry happened, when he joined Imperial Logistics as a truck driver.

Once again his leadership skills were acknowledged when he was elected shop steward in November of that year.

In 2000 when his defunct Union merged with the South

African Railway and Harbour's Union to form SATAWU, Comrade President Tjaitjai was elected Chairperson of the Road Freight Sector at the Germiston Local.

By 2016 he was Gauteng Deputy Chairperson of the Road Freight sector.

Comrade president was not one person attached to titles, which is why it was easy for him to resign from SATAWU when he realized that his Union had derailed.

He joined DETAWU at its infant stages with limited possibilities to get a position or any form of reward.

Not long ago after joining DETAWU, in March/April 2016. Once again his leadership abilities received a nod and he was elected shop steward. February 2017 saw him become the acting Gauteng Chairperson.

A few months down the line after his election as the Gauteng acting Provincial chairperson, the position of the Deputy President became vacant when comrade Rakololo resigned from his employment and consequently, as a member.

The DETAWU April 2017 Central Executive Committee meeting, unanimously elected comrade President Reuben unopposed as a Deputy President and he was fortunate to work alongside the DETAWU founding President comrade June Dube.



Sadly, Comrade June Dube passed away in February 2018 leaving the position of President vacant. Comrade President Tjaitjai was elected president at a CEC in December of that same year, 2018

Interestingly, during his nomination, he asked for a short break to consult with his family, little did I know that I was actually the family he was referring to.

He slowly walked towards where I was seated and he said comrade GS can I have a word with you I responded affirmatively.

He said as you know I have recently been given a huge task to build the Gauteng province, now comrades are taking me out of Gauteng where I believe there is much work to be done and they are deploying me to the Head office.

He sought my view on that. He did not jump to accept the nomination like many of us would do when such an opportunity presents itself. This for me was a full description of his character, a consultative leader.

I said to him comrade Reuben I think the comrades are right in exercising their choice in the manner they have done, the Union is unitary in character and the broader vision is at Head Office not in the province, and thereafter he accepted the nomination.

I was convinced that comrade president was very organized more than some organisers and disciplined, I admired him.

Comrade President Tjaitjai could be accommodating and understanding in boardrooms but he was also a no-nuisance taker. and once he took a stance, he wouldn't shift unless convinced through thorough argument and persuasion.

However, there was one aspect of his steadfastness that even the most persuasive arguments could not sway – his staunch support for Kaizer Chiefs.

Even when it was clear that his once glorious team had become a shadow of its former self, I could never convince him to stop supporting them.

He remained a loyal and dedicated supporter until the very end, he was a Khosi for life. His commitment to his beloved team mirrored his dedication to the union – steadfast, unyielding, and unwavering in the face of adversity.

I have won many arguments in our discussions personally and organisationally however I must concede that I could never convince him to stop supporting the Kaizer Chiefs team,

The president believed that DETAWU was strong and

capable but equally, he believed that it could still be made stronger.

Even though he did not have a beautiful voice he was far better than me, his loved song will always resonate with us, we could not finish any Union activity without him leading a song *uma kungena uDETAWU amagwala azobaleka*,

His insistence on accountability was evident in his challenge to other fellow worker leaders during National Office Bearers Committee meetings.

He would say, **"You are shop stewards in your company and provinces where you come from; tell this meeting what you are doing to build the union every day as a shop steward in the context of worker control."**

By urging them to reflect on their roles as shop stewards and their contributions to building the union daily, he emphasized the importance of grassroots activism and worker empowerment in driving meaningful change within the organisation.

His words were not merely rhetoric; they reflected his deep commitment to the principles of worker control and democratic participation.

Comrade President Reuben understood that the true strength of DETAWU lay in the active involvement and ownership of its members in shaping its direction and priorities.

He would respectfully drive them out of their comfort zone. I used to cherish these moments.

The Deputy president comrade Nigel Fortune is present here today he could attest to this.

There is no doubt in my mind that given the chance, President Tjaitjai would reaffirm his commitment to DETAWU by signing the membership joining form again and continuing his tireless efforts to strengthen and empower the union and its members.

We wish he could speedily multiply.

The bond between Comrade Tjaitjai and myself was not just one of professional collaboration but of mutual respect and a shared vision for the union we served.

From the moment he assumed the role of president, we recognised the importance of maintaining unity and solidarity within our ranks.

He used to address me with my clan name, Mgazi even though he was more advanced in age than I am.

In our one-on-one informal meeting following his election, I

emphasized the significance of his position and the potential impact of his actions on the union as a whole.

We understood that the decisions we made, the alliances we formed, and the causes we championed could either strengthen or undermine the unity of our organisation.

Together, we forged a pact to prioritise the collective interests of our members above all else.

We committed to working together, hand in hand, to navigate the complexities of union politics and ensure that our actions were always in the best interest of the union and its members.

Comrade Tjaitjai wholeheartedly embraced this approach, never wavering from our shared commitment to unity and solidarity.

His leadership was characterised by a deep understanding of the importance of preserving harmony within the union, even in the face of challenges and disagreements.

It does not mean we never had difficulties and challenges but we both understood that a united front from both offices was sacrosanct and a good receipt for the Union.

When the president and the General Secretary are United everybody in the Union unites automatically, the easiest way to divide the Trade Union is to drive a wedge between the two offices.

By emphasising unity, we did not want to put our structures and members in a situation of having to choose between the president or the General Secretary because we both knew that once that happened we would have paralyzed and weakened the Union. After all, factions are not good for any organisation.

I am very proud to mention that comrade President leaves behind a solid Union, firmly united Union with a clear vision to consolidate itself into a force to be reckoned with. He leaves it more strong than he inherited it. We thank him very much for this.

Comrade President we hereby confirm to you that with heavy hearts we accept your baton and vow that in your honour we shall relentlessly build a DETAWU that you would have liked to see, a strong, self-sustenance, and militant DETAWU, a Union that you will be proud of.

Comrade President we regret that in all your teachings you know that there is one thing you never taught us, you never taught us what must we do when you are gone to remain strong.

You never taught us how to navigate the challenges without you in the forefront, however, we are confident that soon you will send us a signal, and we demand it comrade president.

We hold your comrade President in the highest esteem, you were our legend, and we hope you will soon resurface and be with us again for we know that leaders of your caliber do not die they multiply.

Siyazi awulalanga uguqe ngamadolo comrade.

We know that in your departure we have gained a powerful spiritual guide and a strong representative on the other side.

Comrade President we know you have fought like a gallant fighter, this is just one fight where you could not emerge victorious, you ultimately succumbed to your illness.

We are here today together with your family to release you to go and join those who left before you, go and join your predecessor our founding president comrade June Dube.

Go and join your organiser comrade David Khambule, go and join your organiser comrade Audrey Manabile, go and join all the DETAWU departed warriors and other heroes and heroines of the working class.

When you arrive, please comrade President tell them that the Union is alive and well, tell them that you left a crucial program behind, and tell them that this year we are conducting shop stewards elections throughout the country.

I know you believed so much in giving a report back when you return from deployment, as you reunite with them tell them that this year we are convening Provincial congresses.

Tell them that next year we are convening a National Congress, tell them that our application for admission to the Road Freight Bargaining Council is already filled with no possibility of not being approved, and tell them that we are admitted to the Private Security Sector Bargaining Council.

Tell them that the Union has received seven consecutive clean audit reports, and tell them that operation Khula DETAWU is ongoing.

Tell them that we are traumatized by the fear of losing a key and influential cadre in the Union every year, this thing is taking a toll on us please help us to stop it.

Under your presidency, there were no squabbles, tensions, or divisions in the union, the organisation was running seamlessly.

Although he did not have the privilege to pursue school further he was a fountain of wisdom, a true organic intellectual of note, he had his way of fixing problems, and he mastered worker's language and needs.

There is no General Secretary who would not envy to work with a person of his character as their President.



I was happy to serve with him and to be under his leadership because he understood that the unity of an organization as young as DETAWU was sacrosanct.

Comrade President always accorded me the highest form of respect. He always made an appointment whenever he needed to see me.

He never walked into my office even when he was at head office, he would ask my PA if the GS was not busy, and if he got a sense that I was busy he would leave without coming to my office.

He was very organised I am not sure if there is any of us here today who have ever encountered such an orderly and well-mannered taxi driver.

We were still expecting so much from you comrade President.

The morning of 22 March 2024 closed an important chapter in the Union, it shall be engraved in our minds and hearts as a significant day of shock, a day of sadness, a day of sorrow and despair in the Union.

As I conclude, let me hestone to mention that, there comes a time in the life of a man where no matter how hard you fight, no matter how resilient you are - you still lose the fight. That moment caught up with you comrade President on 22 March 2024 and you sadly succumbed.

But death should not be proud because your footsteps are so visible in our eyes, such that it will be difficult for us who remain behind not to follow your footsteps and emulate your teachings.

We want you to rest in peace knowing that the idea that you lived for and struggled so hard to achieve continues to live on through us.

Going forward, we will replace the position of DETAWU President as a constitutional requirement, but we will never be able to replace the personality of President Reuben Tjaitjai in the union, the void he leaves in the Union is huge to fill, he is indispensable.

We know you would not want us to mourn your death indefinitely, instead, you would want us to organise, we promise you comrade President that in your honour we shall pump up Operation Khula DETAWU.

To the family, thank you very much for sharing your husband, father, and son with us, we know that some of the time he spent with us even on weekends he could have spent it with you.

We extend our heartfelt condolences even though we are grieving too, be strong knowing that your loss is our loss too.

Hamba kahle Comrade President sohlala njalo

sikukhumbula and all the laughter we shared together and the tribulations we went through together.

Akwehlanga lungehlanga, sithi emndenini kamufi awulale ngenxeba.

Long live the undying spirit of comrade President Reuben long live.