

## **Bionote**

### **Roza Deshpande, Mumbai**

She was born on May 13, 1929. She was born, so to say, in the trade union movement, among the workers themselves. She was at the mill gates on the 13th day of her birth, taken by her mother, who herself was an active and famous trade union leader in Bombay. Other women workers were her aunts and grandmothers, who used to look after her in her mother's absence, and fed her.

Roza was named after the famous German leader Rosa Luxemburg.

Roza and her parents lived in the chawls of Parel, Prabhadevi and other chawls of Bombay; gutters were her playground. She used to attend meetings of the workers at the age of 8, and even collect subscriptions.

Roza was put in a school in 1935 at Poona. Then she and her family came back to Bombay. She not only witnessed the naval mutiny of 1946 with her own eyes but participated in the student strike in support of it. She was active in the Castle Barracks during this time.

Roza did honours course in Marathi literature from S.P. College, Poona. She became involved in the Girni Kamgar Union activities in Bombay and went through many ups and downs during the late 1940s.

Roza joined the ration shop in a workers bustee as an employee to earn her livelihood. She was active as workers' activist and leader during the Goa Liberation movement, the Samyukta Maharashtra movement and other movements. She organised the girls working in the Vanaspati mills during this time.

Roza organised, on her own initiative, a great march of women workers in Bombay in 1964. Three lakhs of signatures were collected in course of it all over the state.

At this time was born the idea of an independent union of the women workers in the pharmaceuticals industry. Roza was the main figure. She also looked after the legal aspects of the trade union work. Pharma unions established Roza as an independent leader. She was attacked by the police during a lathi-charge but was surrounded and saved by the girls.

There was a big organisation of the girls in the Johnson and Johnson. There were several militant movements. During one incident, the girls broke open the factory gate under Roza's leadership. One factory was shifted to Bangalore; the girls also went there.

Roza won the Parliament seat from Bombay in 1974 and became an M.P. She later joined the AICP/UCPI and its trade union activities.

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## **Transcriptive Note**

### **Roza Deshpande, Mumbai**

(The interview was conducted by Anil Rajimwale in Mumbai on June 21, 2003 at her residence at 4.30 pm)

My date of birth is May 13, 1929. I am born and brought up among the workers, in their movement and trade union activities. I am a trade unionist since my birth itself!

On the 13th day of my birth I was taken to the mill gates by my mother, who was a trade union leader in her own right. In fact, she was India's first woman trade union leader. The women workers around me were my aunts and grandmothers. They fed me whenever I cried.

I was named "Roza" by Shaukat Usmani, after the famous German revolutionary leader Rosa Luxemburg. We lived in the chawls of Prabhadevi and Parel along with other workers, and underwent all their trials and tribulations. My mother was bold enough to take up the nurse's job and at the same time carry on the work of organising and agitating the workers, particularly the women workers. My playgrounds were the gutters of the workers' chawls. At the age of 8, I used to sit in the meetings of the workers, and even helped collecting membership subscriptions.

I was put in the school in 1935 in Poona. We returned to Bombay in 1938. The first "Gherao" was organised by my mother in 1937 in the Bitiya Textile Mills in Bombay. Ultimately, I did my honours in Marathi literature from S.P. College, Poona. In Bombay, I became involved in the activities of the Girni Kamgar Union.

I joined the ration shop in one of the chawls as an employee in order to help my family financially. I saw the great naval uprising of 1946 with my own eyes. There were joint activities by the naval ratings, workers and students. I participated in this joint action as a student activist. I worked in the area of the Castle Barracks. There was so much repression of workers, so much firing all around. Some 300 workers died in the police firings. I had practically become a wholetimer.

There were so many ups and downs during that period of the 1940s and so much trouble for our family. I got married in 1952 but my activities did not cease. I saw and participated in the Goa liberation and Samyukta Maharashtra movements as workers actively participated in them.

Later, I began to grow as an independent working class leader in the 1960s with the great inspirations of my parents. They always taught me to be independent. I initiated and organised the Great March of women workers in Bombay in 1964. Women workers of Bombay and Maharashtra have always played a great role in the movement. People used to say that I could not act independently of my parents, but I showed everybody that I could work as an independent leader. We collected three lakh signatures all over the state.

At this time came the idea of organising the workers of pharmaceuticals industry. Most of the pharma workers are women and girls. I had in the meantime learnt to do legal work of the labour conciliation, courts and conduct negotiations. The pharma girl workers' movement grew up and became a big force. There took place several movements. In one of the strikes, I was attacked by the police during a lathi-charge, but the girls surrounded me and saved me.

In Johnson and Johnson, there were big movements and big fights with the managements. In one of them, the girls broke the main gate open. One of the factories belonging to Smith was shifted to Bangalore; the girls shifted too and continued their struggles. I used to go to Bangalore.

We used to fight the management more severely in the MNCs; we allowed no concessions on bonus, etc in them. On the other hand, we allowed some concessions to the Indian owners and managements.

I won the Parliament election of 1974 from Bombay. I became an M.P. It was just a chance. People used to say again that I could not win, that I was in the shadow of my father. Yet I won that seat. People were surprised. In my constituency, the workers comprised a big section. They helped me a lot to win.

Later on, I was in the AICP and UCPI, but I continued the trade union activities.