

## A Cosatu official **talks out**



*Senior Cosatu leaders were rather surprised when their campaigns co-ordinator told delegates at the TAC/Cosatu conference how, as a mother, she was dealing with her daughter's HIV status. Cosatu's **Theo Steele** talks to the **Labour Bulletin** about her experiences.*

**H**ow was Cosatu's campaigns co-ordinator Theo Steele to even imagine in 1998 when she became involved in federation's HIV/AIDS campaign, that she was preparing herself and her family for the day when her daughter would inform her that she was HIV positive? 'If my daughter had come to me in 1998 and informed me that she was HIV positive, I could not have been able to handle it,' Steele says. However, since joining Cosatu fulltime in 1998 as their campaigns co-ordinator, she has learnt about the disease (and in the process taught her children) and is now in a position where she can cope and assist her daughter and many others in her position.

As a Sactwu shopsteward in the late 1980s Steele thought that HIV/AIDS was a US-based issue affecting gays and drug users. Today, she knows differently. Steele recalls how her views around the disease began to change during the 1990s when it suddenly began to affect those around her. This

'monster disease' was attacking our people, she says. 'If you were tested then it meant a death sentence. That is why people did not want to be tested.' At that time people were not talking so openly about antiretrovirals and we were not aware of treatment and how one could live with the disease.

Steele began to realise over time, through treatment literacy, that the disease was not a death sentence. This has helped her come to accept that her daughter can live with the virus.

Steele's desire to spearhead the HIV/AIDS campaign led to her involvement with the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC). She became an executive member of TAC and remains one to this day.

Steele believes that the HIV struggle has to be fought in the same way as the political struggle was fought. 'We need people to speak openly about the disease. One can still be a loyal member of the ANC.' As a shopsteward, Steele recalls how she would challenge her bosses (and union leaders) if necessary. Steele feels now that if she must challenge government in the same way that she challenged her employers in the workplace, then so be it.

In the post-1994 period her children asked her why she was continuing with

her work when she had done so much. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s Steele shared her experiences and knowledge with her children. She educated her children about her HIV/AIDS work so when her daughter had to take an AIDS test for insurance purposes she did not refuse. Steele said she was safe in the knowledge that her daughter would be negative. Her daughter did not have multiple partners. She had only ever had one partner whom she married. 'I saw her as my innocent daughter.'

Steele's daughter phoned her at work last year to inform her that she was positive. The first thing she asked her mother was: 'Why do I have the disease and where did I get it from?' Steele realised that the campaign to 'be faithful and condomise' had no relevance to her daughter. She had been faithful but how had it helped her. This has direct bearing on gender issues and how women are viewed in our society.

'When my daughter was ready, I began to speak out about her status.' Steele had not spoken openly in a public forum until the TAC/Cosatu conference. However, she has begun to talk to the women at Cosatu head-office.