

# A love match or marriage of convenience?

The need to unify workers has become almost a mantra as the three federations continue to talk the talk. Nactu and Fedusa seem to have gone beyond the talk with claims that a merger could be in the offing by the end of the year. How realistic is such a merger in view of different strategies, politics and histories? Have these issues become irrelevant in the fight to survive and grow? The **Labour Bulletin** reports on the unity process currently underway between Fedusa and Nactu.

Talks between the Federation of Unions of South Africa (Fedusa) and the National Council of Trade Unions (Nactu) gained momentum following the departure of the former Nactu general secretary Cunningham Ngcukana who left the organisation last year to take up a position in the Nepad secretariat. For some time now there has been much speculation about the state of Nactu, which is still seen as the third largest affiliate with a claimed membership in the region of 300 000. Following the departure of Ngcukana, his deputy Mahlomola Skhosana took over as general secretary while long time trade unionist and general secretary of one of Nactu's strongest affiliates (SA Chemical Workers Union), Manene Samela, was appointed deputy general secretary.

While these changes were taking place in Nactu, Fedusa continued to explore ways of increasing its membership. The federations' membership has grown steadily from an initial base of just over 200 000 when it emerged out of the old Fedal in 1997. Since then, Fedusa has moved to reinvent itself and position itself as a multi-racial organisation, which represents workers across all occupations.

While Fedusa emerged out of the mould

of Fedal, which largely represented the interests of conservative white workers, Nactu was formed in 1985 as a response to the launch of Cosatu. Unions affiliated to two union groupings Cusa and Azactu came together to form Nactu. Cusa had initially participated in the unity talks leading to the launch of Cosatu but withdrew after being involved in the unity process for a number of years. Some Cusa affiliates such as the National Union of Mineworkers withdrew from Cusa and became part of the unity process leading to the launch of Cosatu. Azactu was never invited to participate in the unity talks but questioned various principles especially relating to the non-racial nature of the new organisation. Both Cusa and Azactu took a firm line on the principle of black leadership. Azactu's affiliates were largely viewed as black consciousness unions while Cusa refused to align itself to any political tendency at the time but was also seen to have a 'black consciousness heritage' (see SALB 28(6)).

Twenty years down the line much has changed both politically and economically. Both union federations see themselves as being politically non-aligned as compared to their counterpart Cosatu. This is not however, a sufficient basis for a merger, even

though political direction is important. Merger processes are invariably difficult as they require the consolidation of two organisations, which might have different cultures, backgrounds, management styles and people with different experiences, attitudes and perceptions. The success of such a merger process will depend on a clear political and organisational commitment of the leaders of both federations (which appears to be evident); whether the process is driven by integrity and honesty; the relative strengths of the two organisations - whether the merger is of two equals - and the extent to which workers (members) are involved in the merger process.

If the parties are able to finalise a memorandum of understanding then the merger process could occur by the end of the year. Fedusa holds its national congress in September where a final decision will be taken, while Nactu's October national congress will have to deliberate on the proposed merger. If the merger takes place, the new federation could claim a membership in the region of 700 000 to 800 000. Fedusa claims a membership of 550 000 from 26 affiliates, while Nactu claims to represent 300 000 workers from 20 affiliates.