

## *'Agent for change'*

*Bulletin: When and why was SACWU formed?*

*Samela:* We were formed in about 1974 during the swell in the labour movement in the early 1970s. We responded to workers wanting to join unions (which is a natural phenomenon). We were mainly formed in Johannesburg and the East Rand and were concerned with soft chemicals, pharmaceuticals and fast moving goods. In the early 1980s we expanded into petrochemicals and plastics. In the late 1980s and early 1990s we moved into glass and petroleum.

*Bulletin: What is your membership and what challenges do you face around increasing membership?*

*Samela:* Our membership is around 30 000 now. In the mid 1980s we saw the emergence of subcontracting and outsourcing. It started in catering, transport and security, and we are now even seeing it in production. We realised that it was undermining the good conditions that we had negotiated, undermining what we had achieved as a union. The subcontracting has worsened today and one of the results is that we have membership in areas more broad than the chemical sector. We have also lost members because of retrenchments, closures and subcontracting.

*Tanya van Meelis interviews  
Manene Samela, general  
secretary of SACWU.*

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Another challenge is that our shopstewards who are getting trained are getting promoted. We support that and think it's good that people are moving to better positions. But we are lagging behind in keeping them in the union. There is a drive to retain them as members and we are becoming more successful. For example, at AEL and Dow/Sentrachem there are managers who are members of SACWU. We send them the message that we can address their interests. That's where the growth of the union is.

The Skills Development Act is a challenge for and priority in the union. It'll change the type of member that we have because there are no longer lifetime jobs, so workers need to use the Act to assist them in finding new jobs. There is a synergy between workers' needs to gain skills and what the union can do to assist them, and the union will be built around that. Industry is changing very fast and we want to ensure that our members are not left behind. We are also concentrating on employment equity - we want to drive those proposals so that people from the ranks and our union will benefit. This will

keep the union active.

**Bulletin:** *Many unions find it difficult to recruit subcontracted workers. How are you organising subcontracted workers?*

**Samela:** It is not easy to organise and represent subcontracted workers, so we support the changes in the LRA regarding subcontracted workers. While the changes in the LRA are not tough enough, they will assist regarding subcontracted workers. Our strategy for recruiting subcontracted workers has different prongs.

First, we are involved with part-time educators from the ranks – they are workers in factories and not employed by the union. If people know their rights they are not as easily exploited and are less apathetic. Workers also learn that they need to be active – even if we negotiate a good deal it will only be for a period. Then other problems will arise that we will have to take up.

We are also using employment equity to deal with the conduct of the main employer. We say that they must be socially responsible and that subcontracted workers need to be treated in the same way as permanent workers. We negotiate with employers to make sure they act in a socially responsible manner towards the subcontracted workers.

We need to change the mindset of employers, but we can't approach them one by one. This means we must be strong at the bargaining council, and set out clearly how employers should act. The same goes with the Sector Education and Training Authority (SETA). We can use the institutions to make sure that subcontractors (who are part of the small employers) work in a different way. We also need to go beyond the industry and use Nedlac to pick up the problematic behaviour of small employers. The CCMA

is another vehicle that can educate employers on how to treat employees. However, they need to do more. They can help prevent disputes by writing awards so they educate both parties. We want a new nation and can't have segments acting in different ways.

We will also continue to train shopstewards on what is happening in the industry and what they can do about it. This can help them to control subcontractors.

**Bulletin:** *You have pointed to the fact that your membership profile is increasingly including more skilled workers and even managers. How do you cater for their interests?*

**Samela:** Managers do not want to be treated differently. We can represent them in dismissals, grievance procedures etc. Companies are not sharing information with white-collar employees. We also need to unpack what is unknown to them, so that these workers can raise issues. For example, they need information on performance management systems – how the ratings work etc. We come in and speak to the company to get the information, and can now say to the companies that you are wrong – there are loopholes in how you rate performance and the attitude of those applying the systems. We also pressurise companies to use employment equity – we say that discrimination must be eradicated across the board. We need to indigenise the economy. You can't build the economy without the indigenous people at the forefront.

**Bulletin:** *What are your structures?*

**Samela:** Workers meet regularly at the plant to discuss issues. They send

shopstewards to our mass meetings, which we hold once every two months. Our shopsteward councils also mandate shopstewards to attend our branch executive committees (BECs), which meets once after two months and ensures that the affairs of the union are run in terms of the constitution. The BECs are accountable to the national executive council (NEC), which meets once a month. We also have a head office and eight regional offices.

**Bulletin:** *How are you staffed?*

**Samela:** We have about 34 staff nationally. Head office has a national administrator (who does finances), two administrators (one of whom supports the general secretary), a messenger and two education officers. The head office accommodates the West Rand and the East Rand branches. One administrator services both branches, the West Rand branch has three organisers and the East Rand branch has one organiser.

Our Tembisa and Modderfontein branch has three organisers and one administrator. Our Far East Rand, New Castle and Pretoria branches each have one organiser and one administrator. Our Durban and Vaal branches have two organisers and one administrator each. And our Western Cape branch has three organisers and one administrator.

A challenge is building the skills of our staff. The union of today can't be the same as the union of yesterday. People need to learn fast and act fast. For a future employee, we need different people with different skills. However, a problem with developing our staff is that funds from abroad are drying up. We also need to look at the service providers and ensure that they add value and are not just looking for money. The fault here lies with the union

because we must say what can we do to ensure that we plan and get added value. For example, we should not say that an audit firm only does an audit once a year. We must ensure that we use them to evaluate our financial position and feed into financial planning.

The labour service organisations (LSOs) present a problem. There is a need for LSOs especially when it comes to specialisation. The time for LSOs fronting for other organisations is gone. They need to make sure they equip themselves with people who deliver. We need research to be done to help us meet our challenges. We need specialists to give inputs. They need to unpack problems and read the situation ahead of time so we can expect developments in companies and the sector and act proactively. We need LSOs to be creative, proactive and think ahead.

**Bulletin:** *For the last three years you have been bargaining centrally with employers in the chemical industry and have been a founder member of the recently formed Chemical Industries Bargaining Council. What do you regard as the major challenges in bargaining now?*

**Samela:** Because we are emphasising the need for skills development, I think we must ensure that the Skills Development Act is linked to centralised bargaining. We've started pilot schemes of linking wages and skills. But this will remain a challenge for the bargaining council. We need to change the mindset of some employers and show them that linking skills and wages is important because they complement each other.

We also need to come up with a model to support our economy. Last year employers, the unions and government visited Norway to see how collective

bargaining takes place. We are looking at how we can ensure job creation and better wages. We want to support growing sustainable jobs and benefits for workers.

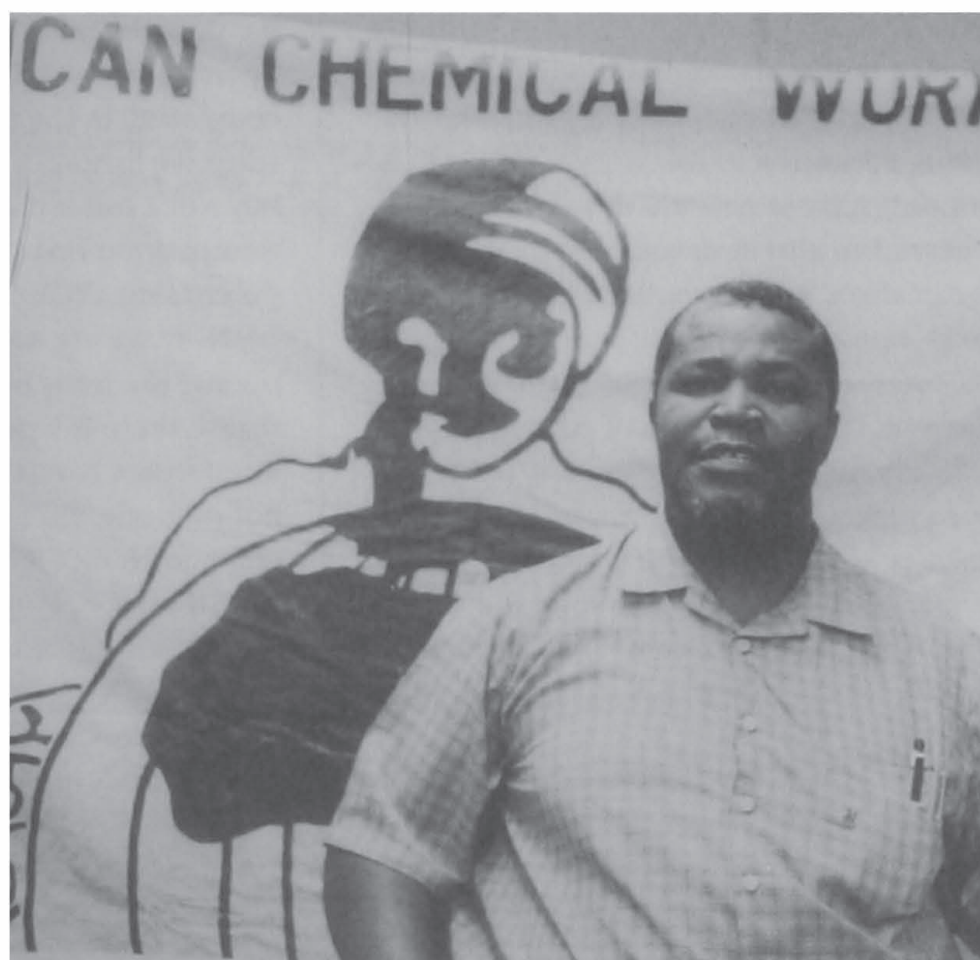
**Bulletin:** *Why is it important to be an affiliate of NACTU?*

**Samela:** We have been affiliated to NACTU since its formation – even though it has changed names several times. In fact we were a founding member. NACTU was

of our making and we continue to play a significant role in it – we have an interest in making sure that it is strong. NACTU can also still do a lot for us. I see unions as agents for change. If you look at where we are politically, unions have played a significant role. Now unions can play an important role in fighting for human rights because human rights include worker rights.

Because NACTU is independent it doesn't have to negotiate with any political party. The history of our struggle shows that unions had to remove the previous regime. Now they must play a watchdog role, and they must be independent to do that. Where we do have relations with political parties, they should be based on specific issues, with a beginning and an end.

**Bulletin:** *Are you active in international work?*



**Samela:** We do work in the international arena because it helps us see where we are going. It is also important to look at the other leg – Africa, where we have to look at the plight of African workers.

We've recently attended three regional executive council meetings of the International Chemical, Energy and Mineworkers' Federation (ICEM). We have to strengthen our ties with other unions in Africa and work with them because South Africa's growth depends on what's happening in Africa.

**Bulletin:** *What campaigns will you be focusing on in 2001?*

**Samela:** Key campaigns revolve around skills and employment equity. As we deal with people's negative attitudes to skills development and employment equity, the intensity of the campaign will increase. We will also focus on protecting and securing

jobs. If we don't take job creation seriously we will be forestalling our liberation. We will also, as part of a NACTU campaign, be taking education to the workers. We will not only look at national development of leaders, but also at developing people at the coalface - workers. We will specifically go to employers who are anti releasing shopstewards for education - and engage them on the importance of educating workers. AIDS is another key issue that we must pick up wherever we go. Finally, another key campaign that we will take up in 2001 is the LRA amendments and we will be taking up the campaign through NACTU.

***Bulletin:** SACWU has recently indicated a desire to buy Anglo's 53% shareholding in AECI. Why have you embarked on this initiative and how do you hope it will benefit workers?*

**Samela:** Our experience of Dow Chemicals takeover of Sentrachem taught us a number of lessons. We had raised the issue of what would happen to the assets of the company with Sentrachem and later Dow, fearing that the new owners would strip the assets. We never got an answer. Sentrachem had been a strong company and had been competing in North America.

When Dow took over I think we lost competitive advantage because of poor management. They also took some products abroad and stopped producing for the Cuban market. The result was that we lost 1 500 workers. We learned from that experience that we need patriotic investors who will keep South African companies' assets intact. The experience informed our strategy around AECI.

When Sasol tried to buy AECI two years ago we opposed the purchase. One of the reasons for our opposition was that

we thought Sasol would close AECI operations down because they were competing in the same markets. At that stage we formed a consortium to try and buy AECI, but it didn't materialise. The Competition Board also ruled against Sasol purchasing AECI.

Now we are saying that we need to pursue the transformation of AECI and realise there is a possibility it could fall into foreign hands or into hands that are not patriotic. We need to keep the company intact. We can only trust investors of our own making or who accept our influence. Merely consulting with employees over the sale of assets is not enough - as shareholders we can have much greater influence.

We need to change the thinking around participation and start participating in ownership to ensure that the company will benefit South Africa and Africa. It has nothing to do with the union or individuals making profits. It has everything to do with retaining jobs and assets in South Africa.

***Bulletin:** What is your message to employers?*

**Samela:** You have the money and should invest in the country. This will lead to job creation. You shouldn't hold your money and have a wait-and-see attitude, as if freedom is not supposed to be here. We'll have fewer problems if you invest.

***Bulletin:** What is your message to members?*

**Samela:** Workers must respond positively to the Skills Development Act - you must take that opportunity. Unions must assist in creating an environment where workers can acquire skills because our economic freedom depends on it. ★