

Always challenges ahead

Bulletin: When and why was SAAPAWU formed?

Nkosi: We were formed in 1995 after COSATU resolved at its congress in 1991 to establish a single farmworkers union. One of the reasons which prompted this resolution was that the unions which organised farmworkers then tended to focus on industrial workers and not the rural workers, so service was a problem.

While we concentrate on farms, our scope is broader as it includes agricultural and plantation workers. This includes agricultural research councils and forestry. Workers were transferred from PPWAWU, FAWU and SACTWU. The membership of NEHAWU in the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry (DWAF) are supposed to be transferred to us.

Bulletin: What is your membership and how has it changed?

Nkosi: When we launched in 1995 we had 29 000 members. This grew up until our next congress in 1997, where we had 33 000 members. At some point the membership grew to about 45 000 and then we had lots of confidence. But there have been lots of retrenchments since the end of 1997 and in 1998. We saw bulk retrenchments. For example, in the Eastern Cape we lost 5 000 members from a government parastatal when government

Tanya van Meelis interviews Motsamai Nkosi, general secretary of the South African Agricultural Plantation and Allied Workers Union (SAAPAWU).

said that it didn't want to farm and closed the farms down after much argument. Our membership is now around 37 000.

Bulletin: How are you trying to increase membership?

Nkosi: Our potential membership is vast. We've always thought that there are 1,1 million farmworkers out there. About 400 000 of them are casual and seasonal workers. We have just come out of a three-month mass recruitment campaign, which we had linked to elections. We wanted to not only focus on mobilising for the ANC but also focus, at the same time, on our organisation.

We saw from the experience of the 1994 election that lots of farmworkers wanted to join a union but there was no union there that could deal with them. No one made follow-ups with those workers straight after the elections. Promises were made to farmworkers to get them a union.

We got in touch with many workers during this year's election campaign and we are now assessing how many members we got from our efforts - we are consolidating.

We have been running rolling recruitment since then and we have been making gains. For example, we organised more than 4 000 workers in one week. We organised a further 3 000 workers in a company in the Northern Province which employs about 8 000 workers. So there are a number of efforts to organise, but we also need to merge with smaller provincially-based unions.

Bulletin: What are relationships like with the other unions in the sector?

Nkosi: There are two other national unions, but we are the biggest union. We think the NACTU union has its membership in two regions. Well, we are working with the NACTU union - the relationship is not so tense, except that obviously they will still take our membership and we will still take their membership.

We have some joint ILO workshops with them and co-ordinate the workshops with them. We meet other unions only in the negotiations. Here we just co-operate for the purpose of achieving whatever we are negotiating. But on the ground, basically, we take their members and they take our members.

Bulletin: What about forming a superunion?

Nkosi: Well, the superunion as per the COSATU demarcation is supposed to be SAAPAWU, SACCAWU and FAWU. This is an interesting combination and I believe that it is appropriate for this combination to come together - we belong to the same

federation and there are linkages in what we do. For example, we grow the food, FAWU makes it and SACCAWU retails it. But every merger has its own problems - for example, the membership issues in FAWU and SACCAWU.

We have had informal discussions with the other unions to see what process to follow to start the merger process. FAWU has a formal position to merge. SAAPAWU still has to take a formal position to merge. But I foresee a smooth merger.

Bulletin: What are your structures?

Nkosi: We have 24 branches but not all are functioning. We have eight regions, seven of them are functioning and one was disbanded because of low membership. Our NEC meets every four months and office bearers meet every two months. We have a congress every three years.

Bulletin: What constitutional changes have you made?

Nkosi: We had only two major changes at the 1997 congress. We changed the congress from taking place every two years to every three years so as to be in line with the federation and to give the leadership enough time to implement resolutions and cut down on costs. We also established branch structures in the constitution - the first constitution did not say how branches should be formed. We turned branches that were already operating into constitutional structures.

Bulletin: Are women represented on your structures?

Nkosi: Women representation has been fairly good in SAAPAWU. For instance, we have had regional chairs who are women

and the Mpumalanga region now has a woman as its chair. All regions have women regional office bearers. I think we were one of the first unions to have a woman president.

Bulletin: How are you staffed and what challenges do you face regarding staffing?

Nkosi: We have 26 staff members. There has been a slight problem at head office in that there has been staff turnover. I am the only person who started in the union who is still in the union. Other people have resigned from the union. The one reason is that the union is not able to pay competitive salaries. However, our members are often not paid well. Many members may earn between R250 to R400 per month. We therefore cannot match what the other COSATU unions are paying.

We will be looking at how to retain staff. We are also putting systems into place that will help stabilise our finances and will help improve staff conditions. But we won't be able to do it in the next year. Our target is to do it in the next two years. I am sure that in two years time we will be able to say that we can match the other unions.

In the interim we need to speak to staff and find out what could be acceptable to them at this stage. We need to give the situation and try to sustain whatever we can put in place for them. We need a favourable working environment, so we need to look at issues like leadership and transparency.

We need to ensure that people in the regions who service members directly have resources. They must have cars because they have to travel to remote areas, it is not a question of choice for the union. Organisers need cars because we

can't easily get to workers because they are in remote areas and because we have to meet them at 5pm when they knock off. We have given some cars but we are still short. We also have a travelling allowance for public transport, even if it means hiring a car. But cash flow problems also cause problems here.

At head office we have programmes in place - we meet monthly to see who's doing what and what assistance is needed. We provide training for staff through Ditsela and we have a national education officer who co-ordinates ILO projects and the South African Labour Development Trust (SALDT) funded training.

Bulletin: What are your bargaining arrangements?

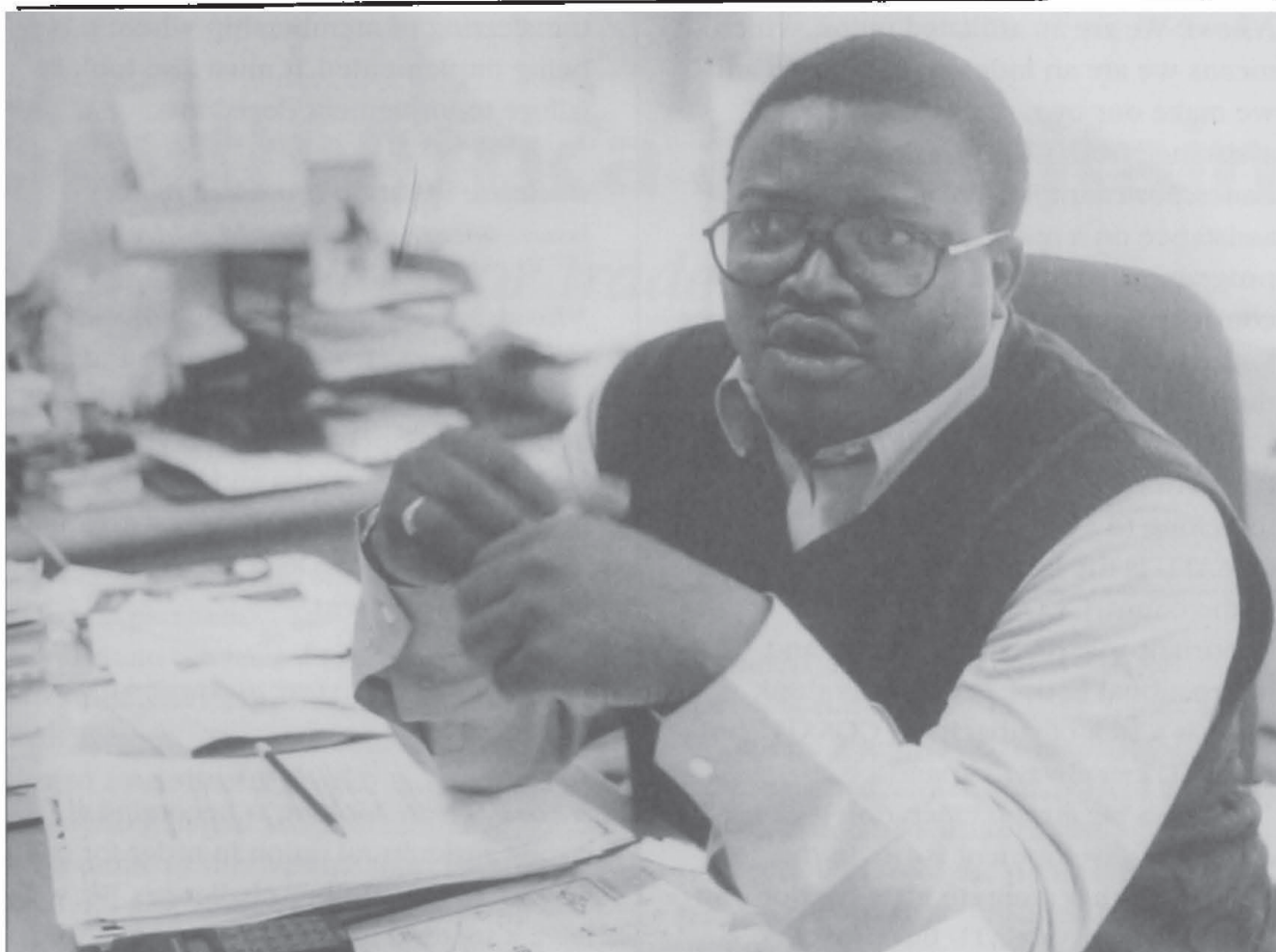
Nkosi: Bargaining is decentralised. Farmers are individuals and won't be pinned to associations. We tried with the association for maize producers and it didn't work. There are some big companies who engage in company level centralised bargaining.

Bulletin: What have you achieved for your members in bargaining?

Nkosi: We have managed to increase the level of wages of workers to some extent. But we have not achieved our minimum of R750 that we pushed for, for all workers. In some companies we have negotiated provident funds and other benefits.

Bulletin: Do you support wage determination by the minister?

Nkosi: I fully support it. In 1996 we made representations on it. Having no minimum wage leads to poverty wages. The minimum should be R750 - though this is not a scientific figure. The researched



Motsamai Nkosi, general secretary of SAAPAWU.

figure we got was R850. People must be able to meet their basic needs.

Bulletin: What major campaigns will you be embarking on?

Nkosi: One major campaign will be for job security. We need to revive structures to drive the campaign. We have agreed to have a month for shopsteward elections. Then we will have a training programme for the shopstewards.

We will have branch congresses in September followed by regional congresses in October and our second national congress from 22 to 26 November 1999. We must mobilise on a continuous basis. Congress will decide on new campaigns. Obviously we will be part of COSATU campaigns.

Bulletin: What key external and internal challenges do you face?

Nkosi: There is a major campaign from the farmers to reduce the workforce. They are looking at mechanising. They will target organised workers first, but they will meet with resistance. COSATU must be prepared to defend our labour laws to help workers deal with these situations. On internal challenges we need to stabilise our situation through stabilising our financial structures and growing our membership. We also need to retain our staff or else we will be left with always having new people who have to be trained.

Bulletin: Why is it important to affiliate to COSATU? What are the strengths and weaknesses of COSATU?

Nkosl: We are an affiliated union, which means we are an independent union and we make our own decisions. We get assistance from COSATU on a number of issues. For example we recently got assistance on a trade union development programme to uplift the organisation. We control our own finances - COSATU never took control of our finances as some thought it might.

We are affiliated to COSATU because it has a strong political voice. It makes sense to belong to a bigger organisation and COSATU is the biggest labour organisation in the country. COSATU plays an important role on labour market and international issues. People may think there is a lack of capacity in COSATU, but COSATU can always expand.

Being a big strong federation it can also deal with development issues in the region. Another strength is its relationship in the alliance. COSATU has proactive ideas on how the alliance should be developed and how joint programmes can be developed. This can keep the alliance strong.

On weaknesses, I think COSATU leadership is changing - when I speak about leadership I don't speak only about elected people. I talk about the people that are working in the head office as well. In the past two/three years we have seen a number of new faces. This is not giving confidence that COSATU will be able to sustain the capacity that we want.

COSATU as a federation is not allowed to intervene in affiliates' problems. I think it must be able to detect problems and deal with them, instead of getting permission from a particular affiliate first. Presently the constitution of COSATU does not allow for that intervention. COSATU must be able to subject affiliates to its principles and policies - which they have adopted. For example, it must look at the

transferring of membership where it is not being implemented. It must also look at failure to implement decisions.

Bulletin: *What do think are the key issues government should address?*

Nkosl: Speedy delivery, is one of the issues. It must also look at crime and job creation. We've had the Jobs Summit but nothing is happening. Instead you see business shedding jobs and people blaming the government for not creating jobs. Everyone must look at these issues, not just government.

Bulletin: *What is your message to workers?*

Nkosl: We are looking at becoming a strong agricultural union in order for us to be able to take up key challenges. We will have a sectoral job creation summit. We must organise in order to be a stronger organisation so that when we approach this Jobs Summit we will have a strong voice. We should strive for one agricultural union in the sector - be strong, be vigilant and revive the union's strength to sustain our campaigns.

Bulletin: *What is your message to employers?*

Nkosl: We don't want you to adopt an arrogant approach, or else we will mobilise to resist you. We will make sure that your plans are not workable. You may think we are small but we are bigger than you think.

We can also use the muscle of COSATU and society who consume what we produce. If you come to us and discuss things with us we won't resist mechanisation if you take care of workers through a social plan. ★