

Are unions being casual about casuals?

Unions have been criticised for failing to actively recruit and represent casual workers. Based on research into the 2003 and 2006 Shoprite strikes, **Themba Masondo** finds that Saccawu has made some inroads into recruiting casuals but this could be undermined by a lack of worker solidarity between casual and permanent workers.

The South African Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers Union (Saccawu) has repeatedly committed itself to recruiting atypical workers. This commitment is probably informed by the fact that the failure to organise casuals has significantly undermined the union's organisational efficacy and presence. The marginalisation of casual workers by unions has not only sowed anti-union feelings from casuals, but notably weakened worker solidarity on the shop floor.

A research project embarked upon at two Shoprite branches in Johannesburg sought to establish if the 2003 and 2006 strikes assisted Saccawu in achieving its objective of organising atypical workers and whether issues around worker solidarity were being addressed. The research revealed that the union has made some headway in organising casual workers. However, adversarial relations among workers persists, which poses a serious threat to the progress achieved hitherto. Unless the union comes up with innovative tactics to address dwindling worker solidarity on the shop floor, the union will inevitably descend into a state of

weakness. The research also exposed the worrying challenges confronting casual workers who face super-exploitation and ill-treatment.

THE STRIKES

The 2003 Shoprite strike was described by some academics as a long over-due action aimed at addressing the union's neglect of non-traditional constituencies. Cosatu general secretary Zwelinzima Vavi described the strike as 'an important move to rectify this problem [of failure to unionise contingent workforce] and build the trade union movement in this sector' (Vavi, 2003). Some unionists and academics were quick to conclude that the strike was a major breakthrough towards achieving unity and cohesion among retail workers. The 2003 strike was sparked off by demands for the reinstatement of the old hourly system for casual workers, 'recognition of the correct length of service for all categories of workers, a guaranteed minimum of 40 hours of work for flexi-timers and 27 hours of work per week for variable time employees', the right to belong to a retirement fund of workers' choice and the

scrapping 'of all oppressive clauses including compulsory HIV testing from contracts of employment, abolishing of credit checks and forced purchasing of uniforms and badges' (Cosatu). The inclusion of demands specific to casual workers naturally attracted them to join the strike and fight for better working conditions and wages. The main demands for the 2006 strike were an increase of R300 or 10% whichever is greater, humane and improved working conditions, a minimum wage of R2 500 (reportedly for full-time workforce only), acceleration of implementation of an 'open and transparent equity plan', provision of free uniforms to part-time workers and guaranteed minimum of 27 hours per week for part-time employees (note that this demand was forwarded at the 2003 strike) (Saccawu, 2006).

'SACCAWU IS FIGHTING FOR US'

The strikes led to an increase in unionisation amongst casuals especially as a number of their demands were addressed. One casual worker interviewed stated that she had been working as a



casual worker for 13 years and had cancelled her union membership in the late 1990s because it was 'a trade union for amapermanents'. She accused the union of disregarding concerns of casuals and that it was there 'only to suck my money'. Her disillusionment lasted until the 2003 strike where she realised that the union was achieving real changes for casual workers. She renewed her membership in 2004 after the introduction of maternity and sick paid leave, provision of free workplace uniforms and ten years service award for casual workers. She has regained hope in the union because 'Saccawu is fighting for us'. Her interest in the union was further fuelled following increases in her hourly rate in 2006. Her views were shared by others interviewed, except for some recently employed casuals.

It is worth mentioning that research results are consistent with Cosatu's statistical assessment on its affiliate's progress in organising workers in atypical forms of employment. Saccawu's membership grew by more than 10% between 2000 and 2006, which has largely been attributed to the two strikes.

IS SUSTAINABILITY GUARANTEED?

The study revealed that despite the union's efforts to unify its membership a lack of worker solidarity is still at its zenith. One casual worker was 'very disturbed' by the manner in which casual and non-casual workers are treated differently by management. Whilst this is not a fault of permanent workers, her anger was directed at such workers instead of management. Another casual worker, who joined the union after 'seeing changes in my [employment] conditions', complained about permanent workers being derogatory towards casuals.

She complained that 'they call us amacasuals as if we do not have names, it is bad, we need them to call us with our names and show respect on us'. The seating arrangement in one of the staff canteens merely reinforced the divisions which exist with casuals and permanent workers grouping themselves in different parts of the canteen. When asked about the divisive seating arrangement, a permanent employee claimed it was an issue of the age gap.

The politicised process of determining working hours for casuals has the potential of dividing such workers and further weakening the union's capacity to champion workers' interests and rights. Casual workers who dare articulate their labour rights are severely punished by being given fewer working hours than those perceived to be obedient. Those who get more working hours are often alleged to be selling out to management.

Continued adversarial relations between atypical and permanent workers, as stated above, has the potential of reversing hard-won gains but also threatens the very existence of the union in the retail sector. Hence, the union's main priority should be to cement good relations among all its members irrespective of status of employment and strive to build working class solidarity. Kenny (1999) is not incorrect in her assessment that: 'Only a united working class will have the strength to resist further attempts to cheapen the cost of labour.'

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