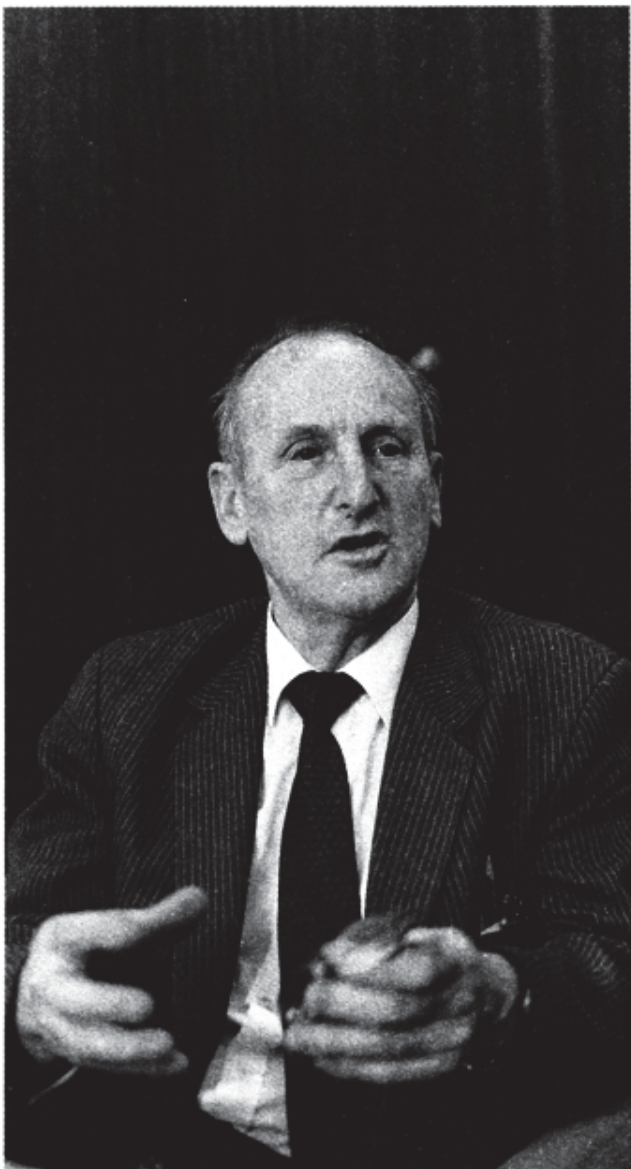




“Artisans *are* *the* key people”



BEN NICHOLSON, general secretary of the SA Electrical Workers Association and director of the Confederation of Metal and Building Unions, speaks to SNUKI ZIKALALA and KARL VON HOLDT.

Bulletin: *In which industry does the SA Electrical Workers Association (SAEWA) organise?*

Nicholson: As a craft union, you will probably realise that we are involved in most industries. We are party to the Industrial Councils in the building industry, electrical contracting, and the iron, steel and engineering industry. We are also organised in Eskom and in the pulp and paper industry, the explosives industry, petroleum and the chemical industry. Although our membership is small compared to the total employees in those industries, our members are the key people.



Bulletin: How many black members do you have in SAEWA?

Nicholson: Seventy five percent of our membership is white and 25% black. The union is predominantly

white, but with black workers coming into the skilled ranks, they tend to flock to us. They do not go to COSATU unions because SAEWA is an organisation which has been devoted for years to the skilled people. We know the requirements, we look after their interests and determine the regulations which apply in their profession or trade. All the artisans in the mining industry come to us.

Bulletin: Do black members occupy any leadership positions?

Nicholson: A number of them are branch chairmen and secretaries. Surprisingly enough, both the branch chairman and secretary of the Welkom branch, which is in the heart of the mining industry, are black. They were elected by white artisans over a year ago.

Bulletin: Is the role of the craft union being eroded or undermined, or is it still something important and ongoing as far as you are concerned?

Nicholson: Very much so. You find that skilled people tend to prefer to be governed by a skilled organisation, because they understand the debates that are going on in the industry. Artisans are the key sector in the whole industry. We determine what an operative is, what training they should get. We comment on draft regulations which regulate, for example, the installation of electrical equipment. We provide legal assistance for member accused of breaking regulations. The fully qualified artisan wants to widen the wage gap. They are the versatile people – they can go anywhere, do anything.

Bulletin: What is your vision of the future of craft unionism in SA

Nicholson: As numbers have become the ruling criteria, the craft unions obviously have to give consideration to the idea of pooling their resources and forming one big union concentrating on skilled and semi-skilled workers. Quality doesn't count anymore - only quantity. We will be on a winning streak if we have both.

Black workers naturally drift towards the union which has the reputation for servicing them as black workers. If we can pool our resources we should be able to really improve the quality of our services to skilled workers. For example, no-one in the black trade unions can give real input on training schedules. Our officials can. They are in touch, they see what's happening on the shopfloor with changing technology.

Skilled workers have different needs, they expect different things. For example, benefit schemes. To my knowledge, none of the black unions has these. The original unions actually started out as benefit societies. We have a long history of providing benefits. If we pool resources we can provide even better benefits.

Bulletin: What kind of issues do your members debate at branch meetings.

Nicholson: We have tremendous difficulty with the employer at this point in time trying to fragment without agreement. Fragmentation is undermining the role of the artisan, breaking it up into little functions. They are not only fragmenting the job to operatives, but fragmenting in what is now called multi-skilling. This is a very serious problem. Really what they are seeking is two trades in one, and to eliminate a lot of people. How can you have a fitter knowing the whole gambit of an electricians job? It is unfair, you do not expect an accountant to be a lawyer as well.

In the chemical industry, you have process workers who are involved in managing the plant. He just gets trained as that particular



employer wants to train him. He is fact trapped in that company. He would not be able to command the same job in a different plant. So we say let us have a basic apprenticeship for process workers in

the chemical industry. This could be a proper apprenticeship. The employer would have to engage him on a three year apprenticeship contract and guarantee training for three years. At the moment he does not do that. He just engages the guy, puts him in some low wage operation, sees potential after a while and says I will drag you to this or that.

It pains us everyday of our lives that we have to say, put that guy into an apprenticeship. The employer will say that it is too expensive. That is the real answer to our skill shortages. Not to train for a bit of a job, but to train as far as possible.

Bulletin: How do you view NUMSA's proposals for training and grading in the metal industry?

Nicholson: NUMSA is trying to transplant a system from Australia when it hasn't even been completed there. I believe the system is incorrect insofar as the relation between the training for semi-skilled and fully-skilled people is concerned.

You cannot have the same training modules for the semi-skilled and fully-skilled person. It depends on the educational level of that person - if he can assimilate the information he should be fully trained as a skilled person. In Australia you have higher educational standards. In South Africa many of our people do not have the educational qualifications to become fully skilled. If you have different educational standards you need different levels of training. We believe a second training board should be established, for semi-skilled people. If you put the two together, one will suffer. We fear it will be the skilled people because they are a minority - yet our country desperately needs these skills.

NUMSA's proposals are the employers' way of approaching training. The employers do just the bits and pieces that suit their business. This means the worker does not have portable skills. With an apprenticeship the employer is under a contractual obligation to train the person fully. With NUMSA's scheme

SA Electrical Workers Association became non-racial in 1978

"SAEWA WAS ESTABLISHED IN 1937. At that time we were a multiracial organisation including whites, coloureds and asians. We also organised operatives, not only artisans. In terms of the Act, African workers were prohibited from being members of a registered union. This went on until 1956 when the government took a decision to have racial unions. My predecessor at that time panicked a little. We

split and formed a union for coloured workers. This went on until 1978 when blacks began to be significant in the electrical industry.

"In 1978 we were able to convince our members, we said 'there is no way you are going to prevent blacks becoming artisans. You will never keep it white, no matter what you intend to do. So why not encourage it, make sure that these people are

trained properly and that they get the same wages and conditions of employment, so that you are not in danger?'

"We took a decision to form a black section. We formed the Electrical and Allied Workers Union. The executives of the three unions met on a quarterly basis to discuss common problems. Those were excellent meetings. We used to get all shades of views.



there is no obligation.

We want to talk it through. But it is not a matter for the wage bargaining forum. It should be discussed in a separate forum, and we will support the employers on this.

Bulletin: *What are your relations with the COSATU affiliates on the shopfloor and in the industrial councils?*

Nicholson: We prefer to reach consensus positions before we go into negotiations, but unfortunately we have been frustrated by unions introducing items which have nothing to do with wage negotiations per se - for example, training, or the elimination of discrimination. Those issues are very important but they should be addressed in a correct forum.

The worst aspect is that they are reluctant to move from their initial demand. We are realistic and we know the economic situation. We say for the good of our members we must

make a new proposal in response to whatever the employers have said. But the NUMSA guys will never move until they have threatened strike action.

I must say that when we had Cyril Ramaphosa in NUM I used to enjoy it. Cyril was a good negotiator. I had the greatest respect for him as a negotiator because he knew when to bend and when to take decisions, which is very essential in this business.

Bulletin: *What is your relation with NUMSA or NUM on the shopfloor?*

Nicholson: The shopstewards from different unions tend to sit together when it is plant level negotiations. They debate plant issues which are being introduced by management. For example, change of working conditions, change of job categories and procedures. They will absolutely be together on those issues. There is no question about it. There might be different tactics. Difficulties arise when our shopstewards refuse to take part in industrial action.

Black shopstewards in our association tend to think the same way as the white shopstewards. Maybe that is why they come to us. They oppose indiscriminate strike action.

“This was prematurely ended by certain radicals who were not Africans but coloureds, who demanded that there must now be one union. At that time the white section was all craft. When they were forced to choose they said there is no way they can be ruled by non-artisans. It was not race but skills. It had nothing to do with race. They said that they must retain the right to have a skilled executive. They said that it was premature.

Then EATU and EAWU decided to break away and

formed a new union which is now MEWUSA.

Structures

“We have the National Executive Council, and a management committee which deals with the day to day affairs of the union. We have 38 branches throughout the country. Some branches are geographical, while others are for specific sectors of the industry. For example, in the big cities there is always a concentration of members who are from lift repair companies

so we have a separate branch for them. Electrical contracting and engineering form the same branch because of common interests. Other sections have their own branches. It is better that way because you do not get people bored listening to other people’s problems.

“We have lost so many good guys because as soon as they prove themselves to be good shopstewards, management grabs them. The leadership potential of these people is significant.” ❖

When it comes to a vote for a legal strike, they will tend not to accept it.

Bulletin: *NUMSA is talking about the need to restructure the industry and make it competitive, increase the skill levels and productivity levels. What is your opinion about that sort of thing?*

Nicholson: I must say that management has the right to manage, but they must take into consideration the views of the workers. We therefore have gone along with NUMSA, particularly in the engineering industry. We have had talks with experts in the aluminium, steel and electronics sectors. These talks will lead to a discussion on how the unions see restructuring of the sectors.

We must participate in the restructuring of industry, but with all respect to my colleagues from COSATU, we do not have all the answers. In fact management and the industrialists are the ones who get paid for planning this sort of thing.

Bulletin: *What would your response be to participative management?*

Nicholson: What is participative management? It says I will manage and you will participate. Whilst there is a necessity for participation from the shopfloor, nevertheless, there is a need to recognise that management is managing.

Bulletin: *What is your attitude towards the NEF?*

Nicholson: We have not been invited. We will make an approach to the secretaries so that we are officially involved. We are not going to beg. I think in fact we should be invited. Maybe we were not because COSATU seems to have taken unto itself the role of being the only spokesman for labour. In this case they were frustrated a little bit by FEDSAL (Federation of South African Labour Unions) because FEDSAL was already in.

Bulletin: *What is your relationship with FEDSAL?*

Nicholson: We were actually having a discussion with FEDSAL about a closer affiliation, but our affiliates did not think that FEDSAL was the right organisation for them. FEDSAL is a white collar organisation and the methods of dealing with issues did not appeal to our affiliates. That is why FITU (Federation of Independent Trade Unions) was formed – as a home for those organisations which did not feel at home with anybody else including FEDSAL. A number of CMBU affiliates are members of FITU, although not SAEWA.

Bulletin: *Is there any prospect in the medium term future of some closer working relation developing with NUMSA?*

Nicholson: The philosophy of NUMSA is not in line with ours. The philosophy of our association is dictated by its craft orientation. NUMSA's philosophy is dictated by the philosophy of the proletariat, that people must have. Our philosophy is that people can only have if they are prepared to work for themselves. Until we can resolve differences of philosophy which are fundamental, we find it difficult to say yes this can happen. We tend to be realistic and very forthright. We do not promise things.

We have managed to survive together which is something. I am sure that our degree of co-operation will improve as our philosophies merge.

Bulletin: *This different philosophy, is it not primarily a political question?*

Nicholson: Absolutely right. It is a political question. We are only hoping and praying that once we have a new government politics will be taken away from the trade union sphere. I accept politics was entered into because there was no other way of expressing political rights. ☆