

# Bulletin for all seasons

Why read the *Labour Bulletin*? **Eddie Webster** argues that the *SALB* has played, and continues to play, a key role as mirror, interlocutor and compass.



As labour moves back to the centre of the South African debate, I was struck by how effectively the recent edition of the *SALB* (31.3) mirrored this shift. Indeed, this has been the *Bulletin's* main achievement over the past 33 years. It has provided the most comprehensive public record of the labour movement's activities. Key to this achievement have been its outstanding editors since 1974: Linda Ensor, Johnny Copelyn (briefly), John Mawbey, Merle Favis, Marcel Golding, Doug Hindson, John Lewis, Karl von Holdt, Deanne Collins, Tanya van Meelis, René Grawitsky and now Kally Forrest.

The *SALB* has also been an interlocutor between labour action and labour analysis and, at times, a compass. These roles play themselves out in different ways at different moments in the development of the labour movement. This is a moment when its role as interlocutor and compass is re-emerging and being redefined in ways that take account of changes in the world of work.

## BULLETIN AS MIRROR

The *Bulletin's* role as a mirror is best captured in this edition by Ebrahim-Khalil Hassen's thoughtful article on the June public sector strike. The strike was significant for four different reasons. Firstly, it is

the largest sectoral strike in our history in terms of working days lost per employee.

Secondly, it brought together, for the first time, black and white workers on a large scale. As Hassen writes: "Unions in the public sector reflect the heterogeneity of identities, histories and perspectives amongst trade unions. Crudely, these are unions that have roots in staff associations created under apartheid, and the so-called 'struggle unions'. Traditionally this meant that white workers belonged to one union, and black workers to another."

Thirdly, the core of the strike was drawn from the 'caring professions': teachers and nurses, occupations that until recently did not belong to traditional unions and never went out on strike. The impact on day-to-day activities – children not going to school, patients not being treated – demonstrated their vital role in society.

Finally, the strikers, despite occasional examples of unacceptable indiscipline and violence, had the public on their side. As Hassen writes: "South Africans share a sense that workers in teaching, nursing and policing should be paid more."

## BULLETIN AS INFORMATION

*Labour Bulletin* (31.3) introduces new information into the labour

debate. The most exciting and controversial information was Peter Hall-Jones's article challenging the conventional wisdom that unions worldwide are in decline.

He argues that between 1998 and 2003 "there are more countries experiencing membership growth than membership decline" and that, globally union membership has increased during this period by nearly 41 million. It all depends, as he argues, on whether you include China's 45 million "unionised" workers. But even if you do not, he validly argues that more and more data on union membership is being lost as globalisation shifts the centre of production to developing countries, where adequate statistical data is not gathered. He underlines their unreliability by reproducing figures from an ILO report suggesting that union membership in Zimbabwe has increased by 54%! As Lloyd Sachikonye shows in his excellent article on the Zimbabwean labour movement, this is unlikely given that jobs in the formal sector have shrunk from 1.5 million in 1999 to 900 000 today. The clearest example of how statistics can be abused for political ends are the dramatically different figures for union membership in India. By measuring membership from 1998, instead of from 1993, Hall-Jones demonstrates a decline of

11.3%, instead of an increase of 104%.

Arguably most valuable for union organisers in this edition is new information on how to respond better to workplace grievances. A practical example is the article by the AIDS Law Project, 'Unlocking Labour Laws: Workplace Discrimination and HIV/AIDS'. It suggests that the first step in developing a workplace policy on HIV/AIDS and a programme of action to prevent discrimination is to approach the employer and begin developing a policy with representatives from all key actors in the workplace, including senior management and the finance department.

#### BULLETIN AS INSTITUTIONAL INNOVATION

I was struck by two examples of institutional innovation by leading experts. The first is by labour lawyer Anton Roskam, who explains the law on minimum service agreements in section 72 of the Labour Relations Act. It is particularly valuable in showing that negotiating a minimum service agreement is not the panacea public sector unions often think it is.

The second are the articles by Annie Devenish and Caroline Skinner, and Pat Horn, on organising informal workers. These go to the core of the challenge facing the labour movement, and show how new organisational forms and strategies are emerging to overcome these challenges.

They suggest that the way to overcome informal workers not being at a traditional workplace is to recruit them at their place of work, whether the street, home or field. If they do not have a formal employer, target the individuals or institutions that influence the workers' environment and negotiate with them, whether a municipality or a global food chain. And if the

traditional way of collecting subscription fees is not possible because of low wages, find donors willing to support these organisations until they are self-sufficient.

What I found most encouraging about this edition is that it brought new issues to the labour movement in an accessible way. The four that stand out are HIV/AIDS as a mental health and bargaining council issue, early childhood development, climate-friendly technologies, and the exclusion of the Chinese community from affirmative action.

#### BULLETIN AS CRITIC

A crucial part of the *SALB's* role is to provide an independent forum for critical debate on issues facing labour. This was not a role won without struggle, as the attempts to suppress the debate on registration in the early eighties by certain individuals in the labour movement demonstrated. This edition exemplifies the *SALB's* independent role, especially in fostering ongoing debates between authors. The first example is the critique of the editor by Prishani Naidoo for allegedly entrenching "gendered stereotypes" by promoting her article on the *Bulletin's* front cover on women's soccer as 'Babes, prostitution and lesbianism'. This is followed by Vishwas Satgar's criticism of Kate Philip's skepticism about co-operatives as a strategy for creating decent and sustainable jobs. A response from inside a union is Mthandeki Nhlapo's accusation of "left sectarianism" by Ebrahim Harvey. Harvey, in an earlier edition, criticised labour for being unable to mount a sustained and effective campaign against the commodification and commercialisation of water.

What surprises me is that so many of these critiques seem to assume that capitalism is about to collapse, rather than offering feasible

alternative job creation strategies. Why have labour intellectuals not produced rigorous critiques of Cosatu's failure to influence the R800-billion pension fund industry or of union investment companies to change traditional patterns of investment? Only the Sactwu Investment Company and the Mineworkers' Investment Company have generated significant sums of money, and then only by running their businesses as capitalist enterprises. Surprisingly, Cosatu has yet to initiate a systematic internal debate on union procurement policies, let alone develop a federation-wide strategy on procurement.

#### BULLETIN AS INTERLOCUTOR

I have argued that the most recent edition of the *SALB* mirrors labour's shift back to the centre of the debate on socioeconomic and political issues in South Africa. This is because the *Bulletin* is a successful interlocutor between two worlds - that of labour action and that of the researcher and analyst. The conversation works because the researchers address workplace issues from a labour perspective in accessible language.

In the edition's last article, Chris Bolsman draws on his PhD on the international solidarity developed between workers in Volkswagen in Germany and South Africa from the late seventies to the present day. He demonstrates that international solidarity works best when it is grounded in strong shop floor structures and when face-to-face contact is established at plant level. Instead of internationalism becoming a form of international diplomacy, the contacts between these two plants led to concrete gains on the shop floor. Bolsman shows that the 14 points in the Minimum Standards Agreement struck in 1987 between employers and unions in German subsidiaries

## SOME PAST LABOUR BULLETIN EDITORS



Johnny Copelyn



John Mawbey



Tanya Van Meelis



Marcel Golding



Deanne Collins



Reneé Grawitsky



John Lewis

strengthened Numsa's position in German plants, gave recognition to black workers, and helped shape the future of our labour law.

Similarly, Mandy Moussouris analyses the largely forgotten Sector Job Summit process and argues that it failed because of a "lack of commitment on the part of business and government". She describes the Nedlac (National Economic Development & Labour Council) negotiation as "shadow boxing (with) Cosatu in the Nedlac boxing ring and government and business standing at the ringside watching labour go through the motions by itself". She concludes: "... social gains for the working class are not won through social dialogue but through direct socialist struggle."

I would put it differently. Social dialogue and social struggle are not polar opposites – they are dynamically interrelated. The emergence of social dialogue in South Africa was a response to social struggles in the apartheid workplace in the 1980s. This led to the signing of the Laboria Minute and the agreement between government, employers and labour to work together on labour law reform.

Similarly, it was the mass strike of 1991 over the unilateral imposition of VAT that led to the establishment of the National Economic Forum, the first attempt at institutionalised social dialogue in South Africa. Institutions and economic policies do not emerge in a vacuum; they are the result of contested ideas and social forces.

But I agree with Moussouris that there is a lack of commitment to social dialogue, and particularly in Nedlac among certain government departments and employers. Indeed, government's ambivalence towards social dialogue as a policy-making style remains the most important obstacle to the strengthening of Nedlac.

#### WHERE HAVE ALL THE LABOUR INTELLECTUALS GONE?

If labour is on its next upsurge, are its intellectuals ready for the challenge? Sakhela Buhlungu, reviewing Richard Calland's book *Anatomy of South Africa: Who holds the power?*, takes the author to task for a narrow concept of power as exercised through the state and its agencies. Instead, he suggests, we need to examine power as "the relationship between the world of politics and the world

of business and how those connections provide avenues to exercise power".

The past decade has seen a significant erosion of labour's intellectual capacity worldwide, including South Africa, as globalisation has undermined the social fabric of many societies without providing an adequate new regulatory and protective framework. At the centre of this has been an intellectual shift in macroeconomics to a predominantly supply-side orientation and neo-liberal rules for global trade and finance. In this paradigm shift, labour as an economic, social and political actor has declined as a focus of intellectual concern in our universities, research agencies, NGOs and the media.

If intellectuals are to play a role in this upsurge, the rebuilding of labour's intellectual capacity needs to be deepened and rethought. In the eighties, during an upsurge of labour militancy in the form of stay-aways, labour researchers formed the Labour Monitoring Group (LMG), to give the media accurate and immediate information on strikes. What was missing from the public sector strike in June was the

equivalent of the LMG. We had superficial commentary in the media and a lack of reliable information on the size, composition and nature of the strike. What is also required is more reflective analyses of the long-term impact of the strike. Will it lead to better education and public health?

This is not a moment simply for mobilisation, where labour uses its power to impose its will regardless of the consequences. Labour must use its power in a more nuanced way, and this more nuanced exercise of power, characteristic of democratic politics, involves a shift to the use of influence in the heart of decision-making at enterprise, sector, national and global levels. This is best accomplished through a dual strategy: participation within the formal institutions of power, combined with the strategic mobilisation of power in civil society.

It is also a moment when labour must increasingly combine the

politics of interest representation with that of social movement forms of protest and struggle. The danger of the former developing alone is that labour becomes a privileged stratum, with a growing number of workers permanently excluded from the core economy. On the other hand, it cannot preserve the role thrust upon it during the anti-apartheid struggle as the voice of the mass of oppressed workers.

### BULLETIN'S ROLE IN LABOUR'S CHALLENGE

Whether labour can strike these balances, develop a coherent strategy, and seize the opportunities remains an open question. There has been a temptation in post-colonial Africa for labour to become preoccupied with its relationship with the governing party at the expense of building its own organisational power in the workplace, the economy and society. Aubrey Matshiqi's sober

analysis of the competing political cultures shaping the ANC succession battle is a cautionary tale of how easily a labour movement can lose its way in this terrain.

The *Bulletin's* best contribution to the challenges facing labour in the era of globalisation is to reassert its role as a key interlocutor and compass. Its most recent edition is a model of how it can play an interlocutory role. This is what is required if it is to fulfill its mission of providing information and stimulating critical analysis and challenges that confront workers, their organisations and their communities. LB

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## THE CHANGING FACE OF LABOUR BULLETIN FROM THE 1970S UNTIL TODAY

