



CWIU: *organisation and worker control*

Karl von Holdt interviews MUZI BUTHELEZI, acting general secretary of CWIU, and other officials.

The Chemical Workers' Industrial Union (CWIU) has a reputation for efficient administration and effective financial controls. Perhaps this is why the union's treasurer, Ronald Mofokeng, was elected treasurer of COSATU at the federation's 1989 congress. Mofokeng's nickname, 'Comrade Mandates', points to another characteristic of CWIU - its emphasis on strong organisation and worker control.

Does the union deserve its reputation? According to acting general secretary, Muzi Buthelezi, "to an extent": "We are very sensitive about administration and good control of money. If someone is elected to be a branch secretary and he is bad at administration, we know the branch will collapse."

On workers' control, Buthelezi says, "If you look at our structures, things come right from the bottom. Our union and our leadership are very strict on the question of mandates. Our view is that the influence of the union is not based on the number of members, but the method of organising. We are very firm on worker control."

Yet the union is also the first to admit that it

faces many problems - shopfloor structures that don't work, a shortage of skilled organisers and staff, with some of the most experienced officials leaving the union. It is also getting involved in more complex and difficult negotiating issues. Similar problems face all the COSATU affiliates, but perhaps CWIU's tradition of efficient organisation and its strong education programmes will help it to overcome the problems.

The union has 45 000 members organised in five branches (Southern Transvaal, North Eastern Transvaal, Natal, Eastern Cape and Western Cape).

Campaigning for centralised bargaining
There is no centralised bargaining forum in the industry. In Buthelezi's words, "We bargain at plant level, which is a nightmare. We have to go from one negotiation to another. It overstretches our resources." The struggle for centralised bargaining is the main campaign of the union for this year. At the union's first national bargaining conference in November 1990, it adopted a resolution to push for



CWIU bargaining conference: tight organisation, worker control - and new challenges

Photo: William Matlala/COSATU

centralised bargaining. The union decided to adopt a sectoral approach, trying to build centralised bargaining in each sector of the chemical industry as a step towards establishing an industrial council for the entire industry.

The struggle for centralised bargaining is most advanced in the petroleum sector. According to Buthelezi, the petroleum national shop steward council is the most well co-ordinated and well organised, and has already been functioning for about two years. Last year national shop steward councils were also established in the heavy chemical, plastics, rubber and glass sectors."

CWIU was one of the unions which insisted that a demand for centralised bargaining be tabled at the recently established National Economic Forum (NEF). CWIU hopes that if agreement can be reached on centralised bargaining at the NEF, it would facilitate the unions' campaign in the chemical sector. In the long run, according to Buthelezi, the union hopes that a democratic government will use legislation to entrench industry-wide centralised bargaining through industrial councils.

The 1991 petroleum strike

Last year negotiations with three petroleum companies were co-ordinated by the petroleum shop stewards council. (The union won company level bargaining with Total, Caltex and BP in 1988/9 and with Shell and Engen in 1990.) The union launched a two week national strike around identical wage demands and a core demand for centralised bargaining. It was the first national strike in the industry. It was particularly significant as it brought in the coloured workers at Caltex refinery in Cape Town. "It was their first experience of a strike."

The union decided to suspend the strike when the companies did not offer any significant improvement on wages. BP agreed to continue negotiating over centralised bargaining and "it looks as if they will take it seriously". Total had agreed in principle to centralised bargaining some time back. This leaves Caltex as the intransigent party.

The strike did not involve Engen and Shell as these two companies negotiated at different times, making co-ordination difficult. They also oppose centralised bargaining.

Once again this year the union will be

co-ordinating its wage bargaining in the petroleum sector with centralised bargaining in mind.

At the Secunda complex, CWIU negotiates with all Sasol companies in a joint forum. This includes Sasol II and III refineries as well as other Sasol companies such as Sasol Fertilizers. The union has been negotiating its demand for countrywide company level bargaining with Sasol for about two years and "we may make a breakthrough there quite soon, although we are not too optimistic."

In other sectors the union faces a tough battle for centralised bargaining.

One factor which weakens CWIU's campaign for centralised bargaining is the existence of another big union in the chemical sector - SA Chemical Worker's Union (SACWU), an affiliate of NACTU. According to Buthelezi, CWIU has asked SACWU - which is strongly organised at Sasol I in Sasolburg - to come into a joint Sasol negotiating forum. "We have also raised with them bargaining together in other companies, where there is overlapping membership. But it seems as if they have decided not to have any contact with CWIU."

SACWU also claims about 45 000 members in the industry. Between them the two unions have organised almost the entire industry. There is very little prospect for further growth unless the two unions merge or poach members from each other.

According to Buthelezi, "If SACWU members decide to cross over to us, we wouldn't send them back. The question of poaching is a very sensitive one, but if our desire for unity and co-operation gets nowhere, there might be no other option." There have been violent clashes in some plants, such as AECI in Modderfontein, between the two unions. Buthelezi hopes that in a post-apartheid South Africa, the two unions will be able to co-operate and even merge.

Would a single union be able to accommodate the ideological differences between CWIU and SACWU? Buthelezi believes that as people come together and start working together, ideological differences don't really cause problems. He believes that 80% of SACWU's

members would feel at home with COSATU.

There is also overlap between CWIU and other COSATU affiliates - PPWAWU, SACTWU and NUMSA. The biggest overlap is with NUMSA. There has been speculation of a possible merger between CWIU and PPWAWU or CWIU and NUMSA, but Buthelezi says there is no formal talk of a merger, although it might be informally discussed in some unions.

Industrial restructuring

Like other COSATU affiliates, CWIU is beginning to think about union involvement in industrial restructuring. The lack of unity between CWIU and SACWU will also make initiatives in this arena difficult. The union has established an industrial restructuring committee.

Broadly speaking, the union would like to see an industry which produces for the needs of the people, which provides training for workers and which provides more jobs. As yet the union has not developed a concrete policy on the restructuring of the chemical industry, but it has held a workshop with employers in the industry. The union discovered that "employers were far beyond us in thinking about restructuring the chemical industry".

However, when the union met with the Minister of Trade and Industry to discuss a report on the future of the industry which had been prepared by employers and the government, the union had some important comments to make. It argued that the chemical industry in South Africa is very small, that its employment of black workers was too low and that it is characterised by high capital investments and very low capital productivity.

The union also objected to the project to establish a R2 billion naphtha cracker, which was proposed in the report. The government was supposed to put R1 billion into that project and the union argued that the money could better be spent on downstream chemical manufacturing. Since then the project has been put on ice.

Social contract

If the union is getting involved in industrial restructuring, does it support the idea of a social contract? Buthelezi is unambiguous: "Our members believe that a social contract route would be a disaster for the unions. It would tie us to what kind of economic system we get."

Indeed the union feared that the national economic forum could lead in the direction of a social contract. "There are lots of fears. COSATU was saying that we should use the forum to discuss broad economic issues. We felt we shouldn't do that. If we get into macro-economic policy we would be binding the hands of a future democratic government. It will then inherit that agreement.

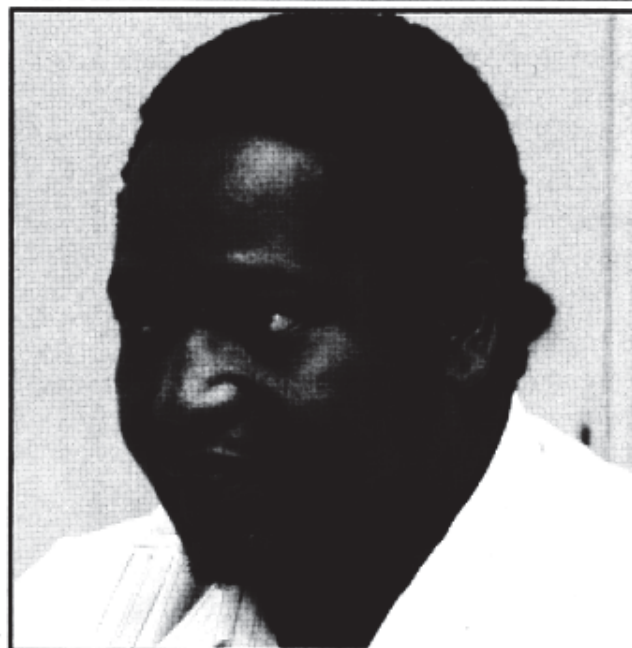
"We want to be able to debate economic policy when we have a future democratic government. Employers want to bind us now and it will be a problem to unshackle the chain. We feel that we should limit the forum to discuss specific and immediate issues affecting workers now. COSATU's position changed early this year and is now the same as Chemical's."

CWIU is also concerned that employers might try to put wage restraints, no strikes and productivity on the agenda at NEF. "We've been resisting negotiating productivity," says Buthelezi.

Weak structures

Despite its reputation as a strongly organised union, CWIU is facing similar problems to other COSATU affiliates. Buthelezi notes that branch meetings and shop steward locals are not as well attended as they used to be. In the factories shop stewards are active in representing workers, but the shop stewards' committees are not very active in co-ordinating issues beyond the factories. This means there is a weak link between shop stewards in the factory and union local and branch structures.

Shop steward committees are also failing to link the factory to community meetings. Buthelezi says many key shop stewards are assuming positions in community organisations or in the structures of the ANC or SACP. "Then



Muzi Buthelezi, acting general secretary of CWIU

Photo: Shariff/Labour Bulletin

too after the unbannings in 1990, we found people saying, 'We don't have to struggle any more. Everything is being done.' You find people are relaxing a bit." The priority is to strengthen structures and to make them work again. "This is a period of crucial political change, and the only way to keep people informed and involved is through structures," he says.

What is the union going to do about this problem? "First thing is to monitor the situation in all the structures. National office-bearers must make a point of visiting branches more often and the locals, so that we know what is happening in the different areas of the union. Then we can assess where there are weak branches or locals that will need the assistance of the union nationally."

The union is also launching a campaign to educate members and shop stewards around the election of shop stewards. Last year the union decided to elect all shop stewards in all factories at the same time nationally. The union campaigned around the issue with pamphlets. Says Buthelezi, "We need to improve on that and use it to educate people and raise the question of what a shop steward is." The union hopes that this campaign will reinvigorate structures in the factories.

The gender issue in CWIU

CWIU has been one of the most active COSATU affiliates in taking up gender issues. At last year's COSATU congress, the union put forward a resolution that the federation should establish a national gender forum, elect at least one woman national office-bearer and employ a full-time women's co-ordinator. This resolution won wide support in the congress, but ran into strenuous resistance from SACTWU and NUM. As a result, the clause on electing one woman as a national office-bearer was dropped.

Although the union has worked consistently to put into practice its resolutions on women members, it is, says education organiser Chris Bonner, "a struggle as it is everywhere. It is a case of a few steps forward and a few steps back." However, "in the union as a whole there is more consciousness of this issue now. There are always women in union delegations."



Woman worker at Propan: "women in every delegation"

Photo: William Matlala/COSATU

Every branch has now elected a woman co-ordinator who sits on the BEC and who convenes women's forums, which look at issues such as maternity rights, child care and Aids. At the national level, a women's forum meets once a year and there are a series of residential seminars and workshops. As yet the union has no women

office-bearers at a national level, although Bonner expects this to change at the next congress. Three branches have women delegates in the NEC delegations, but according to Bonner, "we are struggling at this level."

The problem starts in the factories. The chairperson of each factory committee is the delegate to the BEC. Since very few women are elected shop stewards or chairs of the shop steward committees, this means very few women delegates attend the BEC and get exposed to broader issues or elected onto NEC delegations.

The various forums and workshops monitor the extent to which women's demands for child care, parental agreements, etc, are taken up with management. They also monitor the implementation of the union's resolution on women. For example, the resolution states that the union should increase the budget for women's forums and seminars. Pressure from these forums has ensured that this is done. v

Staff

Like other trade unions, CWIU is finding it difficult to attract and keep good staff. "Some key organisers have left the union, and we are not getting good quality people with the necessary commitment," says Buthelezi. "There is a problem in our union, I must say, and a problem in COSATU. With the changing political situation, people are looking for good pastures where they can spend less time at work and more time with their families."

Certainly CWIU organisers are heavily

loaded with work. One reason may be that unlike other unions, CWIU does not employ national organisers to co-ordinate sectors or campaigns and collective bargaining. Individuals in the branches are given the additional responsibility of co-ordinating specific sectors. This means that the most talented and experienced staff have to carry responsibilities both in the branches and on the national level.

Does this not weaken the union's ability to develop national campaigns and national

struggles? "No," answers Buthelezi. "Big unions have the finances to afford national organisers and big head offices. They are also involved in industrial councils and centralised bargaining. We cannot employ national organisers and then find they have nothing to

do because we do not yet have any centralised negotiations." The union is cautious about budgeting and finances. "We cannot just have national organisers for the sake of having them. We need proper planning of finances and resources." Buthelezi also points out that the

CWIU - the green union

CWIU is the greenest union in COSATU. In its struggle against dumping foreign chemicals in South Africa in 1990, the union built an alliance with local community and environmental organisations as well as with Greenpeace. Now the union is trying to connect the factory and broader environmental issues through negotiating health, safety and environmental agreements. Pilot negotiations are starting with Sasol and Cyanamid.

CWIU official Shirley Miller says, "Workers are the worst affected. They work inside the factory with noxious chemicals and they live near the factories in environments which are polluted by the same chemicals." She says that the recent inquest finding that Sasol management was grossly negligent in the accident which killed twelve workers last year, will give a boost to the union's campaign for health, safety and environmental agreements.

"We always argue that we cannot leave health and safety or environmental issues to management. We need strong laws. Self-regulation doesn't work. Finding that

management was grossly negligent will help our case." The inquest finding resulted in a hefty out-of-court settlement. The union not only represented the widows of the black workers killed in the accident, but also six white widows who felt that the white Yster en Staal Union was not taking up their case.

The environmental component means that the union wants the right to know about what chemicals have been used and whether they are affecting the environment. Currently the manufacturer loses responsibility once it has sold a product to the consumer. Miller argues for a 'cradle to the grave' approach, in other words the manufacturer should assume responsibility for the entire life of the product right up until final disposal.

The union believes that manufacturers have a responsibility to the communities near the factories. It is demanding, for example, that Sasol fund an epidemiological study on communities near Secunda.

According to Miller, it is difficult to raise consciousness among

members around these issues. Nonetheless, workers are beginning to raise questions of pollution in communities. "Workers want to know about the waste products that come out of the factory. Once they have won proper ventilation inside factories, they start to ask where the chemicals that have been sucked out are going."

Unions often find it difficult to raise environmental issues, because it can mean job losses when plants are closed down or products discontinued. CWIU argues that workers shouldn't have to bear the costs for environmental safety. "These demands should be tied closely to economic restructuring so that industry does not damage the environment. They also need to be tied to a proper social security system so that if workers do lose jobs, they are not dumped on the streets. Unions in Europe are also finding that environmental campaigns can help create jobs as when companies are pressurised to establish clean-up divisions."

CWIU can be credited with placing environmental issues on the working class agenda within COSATU. ❖

union recently appointed its first national organiser, Meshak Ravuku. Ravuku will co-ordinate national negotiations where they occur, national recruitment and the centralised bargaining campaign.

Many unions have done the opposite and developed large and bloated head offices and have then found that resources are squandered, there is a lack of co-ordination and national organising is ineffective. While CWIU's style has helped the union avoid this problem, it may cause others. A national leadership steeped in a culture of financial and organisational caution may find it difficult to accept the radical restructuring that might be necessary for the union as it takes up the new challenges of centralised bargaining, industrial restructuring and increased size.

If the union is going to attract and keep staff, it will have to look again at salaries and conditions of work. Buthelezi acknowledges that the union has "the old policy" of equal wages for all staff. The only distinction is between staff who work unfixed hours and those who work fixed hours, such as administrative staff. But all organisers, from the general secretary to the local organiser, are paid the same wage. There is a service allowance. This system is under discussion and may lead to the introduction of a grading system of differentiated salaries, but "changing long established practices in the union is difficult."

Education

However, the union has invested wisely in sound administration and a thorough educational programme. The union has one national education officer and three regional educators. The education programme focuses on development of staff, shop steward training and leadership skills. A range of seminars, workshops and courses are held at branch and national level. According to Chris Bonner, national education officer, "our education programme is designed to link into the work of the organisation and empower the leadership and the shop stewards to control the union."

The education programme aims to impart skills and backup campaigns and policy debates. One of the key items on the education

programme is centralised bargaining. Indeed, Buthelezi says the centralised bargaining thrust needs to be backed up with education because the union has found that many shop stewards do not really support centralised bargaining. "If you start talking about centralised bargaining, shop stewards in the petroleum sector, which is highly paid, will start comparing themselves to those in the plastic sector, where workers still only earn about R3,05 an hour."

CWIU and COSATU

In the early days of COSATU, tensions ran deep in the federation, "Since the inception of COSATU, CWIU has been pushing for proper administration and mandating mechanisms within the federation," says Buthelezi. During the 1987/88 period of heightened mass struggle, CWIU delegations in COSATU structures tended to argue for more emphasis to be placed on building organisation, and on specific campaigns against the Labour Relations Amendment Act and for a living wage.

It was this emphasis on organisation and campaigns that allowed the union - together with PPWAWU - to play the most active role in the early factory demonstrations against the Labour Relations Amendment Bill. CWIU believes the way of involving the rank and file is by reporting back and getting mandates.

"Today we still support the idea that issues are conveyed to membership for discussion and decisions before making them public. It is always difficult to explain to workers certain decisions publicised without their having been involved. The Labour Relations Act campaign was successful because of involvement of workers at all stages of that campaign.

"It is very important to focus on issues which workers view as closer to them while at the same time we engage ourselves in a broader struggle. It is crucial for the working class to build the ANC alliance and ensure that it will get to power as a future vehicle for advancing broad working class interests. In 1987, the union adopted the Freedom Charter as 'the set of basic demands for the removal of national oppression and economic exploitation.'"

According to Buthelezi, "our position is that we must build the ANC. In Secunda, for example, the ANC branch executive is almost all chemical members. When the ANC came to Secunda we were recruiting for it. We still push Sasol workers that they should join the ANC. Our view is that if you don't do that, you are allowing other reactionary forces to come in and start recruiting. We are also part of the alliance, and what is the point of that unless we are building the alliance and the alliance partners?"

The CWIU argument against the wearing of two hats is based on a desire for the organisation to be efficient and for leaders to be clear about their mandates, rather than on hostility to political organisations. It is this kind of emphasis on organisation building and independence which has turned CWIU into a relatively strong and effective organisation, while many of the overtly political unions are struggling with weak structures, inefficiency and a lack of planning.

CWIU believes that COSATU should be playing a more assertive role in the tri-partite alliance. "I think there was a view that COSATU was simply toeing the line with the alliance," says Buthelezi. "But the anti-VAT campaign has brought back to members the old COSATU that they knew and showed the partners in the alliance that COSATU does still have muscle and support. My view is that the partners in the alliance have a lot to learn from COSATU. There was a fear that mass action has been suppressed. The VAT campaign has brought mass action back as part of the process of negotiating."

Buthelezi says the union supports the tri-partite alliance, but "there is a major concern in the union that the alliance structures are not operating properly and there is no real co-ordination." The present situation is "very dicey". For example, the union supports the idea that CODESA can negotiate broad constitutional principles, "but how do we prevent CODESA from turning into a constituent assembly?" Buthelezi says shop stewards sometimes express a fear that the ANC might compromise on the issues affecting the working class. "Our concern is about economic issues and the question of a constituent assembly."

New challenges

CWIU is probably one of the best organised of the COSATU affiliates. Besides the other factors which have been discussed above this is at least partly because the union is still relatively small with only 45 000 members.

The union also has a reputation for effective strategising and campaigns. It tends to establish a clear set of demands which it believes are achievable and then plan a careful campaign around them. It then uses a range of tactics resting on militant shop floor organisation and sophisticated negotiating skills to chip away at employer resistance.

Growth of the union and its influence in the chemical industry is seriously hampered by the lack of centralised bargaining. CWIU will encounter strong resistance to centralised bargaining, but if it employs the same strategies and tactics as it has in other campaigns (such as its disinvestment campaign and its campaign for the Chemical Industries National Provident Fund) it is likely to make breakthroughs over time.

The other major challenge facing the union is its relationship with SACWU. If the growing co-operation between NACTU and COSATU facilitates co-operation between SACWU and CWIU, the thrust for centralised bargaining and increasing labour influence in the chemical industry will be greatly strengthened. However, if co-operation does not succeed there is likely to be a poaching war between the two unions.

Finally, like all COSATU affiliates, CWIU is facing a range of new problems - increasing size, more complex issues, issues that are negotiated over a long period, centralised bargaining, industrial and economic restructuring. These changes will probably require more skilled staff, a big head office and entail new policies such as differentiated salaries. Will the union be able to maintain its tradition of worker control and democracy under these conditions?

One thing is certain, the union is relatively well equipped. With its strong education programme, its culture of worker control and organisational efficiency, and its experience of careful strategic planning, it may be able to deal with these challenges better than most. ☆