

# Challenges facing labour

*a Labour Bulletin workshop*

The *Labour Bulletin*, the Sociology of Work Unit (SWOP) and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) held a workshop entitled 'Globalisation and democracy: Challenges facing labour' on 6 April 2001. The aim of the workshop was to analyse the opportunities and constraints facing labour in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## **The themes and speakers**

Dinga Sikwebu and Bobby Marie tackled the first theme 'Organisation and vision'. They looked at what has happened in the unions since the report of the September Commission in 1997. (We hope to publish their inputs in a later edition.) Ari Sitas, the next speaker, considered the theme 'Informalisation and unions'. The speakers for the 'Restructuring' session were Eddie Webster and Karl von Holdt. They examined trends in the restructuring of work and how unions have responded to those. The 'Unions and politics' session saw Lloyd Sachikonye and Roger Southall address the workshop. Sachikonye reviewed the debates about the role of labour movements in economic and political change. He focused on Southern Africa. Southall analysed the state of relations in the tripartite alliance and proposed ways for COSATU to fight marginalisation.

The participants in the workshop were labour researchers based in labour service

*Rahmat Omar and Etienne Vlok introduce the focus, 'Challenges facing labour'.*

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organisations, unions and universities, and unionists engaging with these issues. The workshop was interactive, with brief inputs from speakers and then more extensive discussions and engagement from participants and speakers. Because of the interactive nature of the workshop, we also publish some of the comments and questions of participants.

On the evening of the workshop a dinner was held to celebrate 27 years of the *Labour Bulletin*. Gwede Mantashe was the guest speaker. In his speech, which is published on p 42, Mantashe recalled the role of the *Labour Bulletin* in helping to overcome the challenges of the past. He also highlighted the challenges of the future.

## **Discussion and issues**

The workshop covered important issues for people analysing the challenges facing labour. During the first session on 'Organisation and vision' there was some discussion and analysis of the context in which unions operate. Several contributions focused on the importance of understanding the dynamics within

unions and locating these in the broader context of the political and economic transition. This will ensure our analyses do not become simplistic, but recognise the dynamics, the constraints and the possibilities

There was a long discussion about the problems and difficulties unions are facing - it sounded quite demoralising. Fortunately, the discussion shifted to what kind of responses are possible and have emerged and what kind of organising strategies the unions are adopting

Discussion also focused on models of unionism, and particularly on criticisms of the industrial model. A range of contributions explored new roles for unions. Some looked at a role as a type of labour market intermediary - along the lines of the initiative to organise and represent casual workers in the transport sector. Other contributions identified the need for unions to extend their base into the community. A highly original contribution in the session on 'Informalisation and unions' considered the possibility of unions entering into social alliances with actors who operate in the 'livelihoods sector'. This is possibly the most exciting challenge facing the labour movement.

The session on 'Restructuring' saw a very useful discussion on the strategies to deal with restructuring of work and the labour market as it is unfolding in South Africa. It became clear that participants were adopting different approaches. While some contributors stressed the importance of adopting a historical approach and taking a



*Rahmat Omar of SWOP.*

longitudinal view of union responses over time, others highlighted the fact that much of the research work focused on different units of analysis. SWOP and Naledi, for example, focused on workplace restructuring. But much of the discussion was on restructuring at a sectoral or a macroeconomic level. This illustrates the need for linking the different levels or units of analysis - the macro issues, sectoral issues and micro or workplace issues

Most of the issues that arose during the workshop demand more frequent exchanges between those people who are involved in research and those in unions. This workshop was an attempt to create a forum for the researchers and unionists to exchange ideas. ★

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