



*JANE BARRETT interviews newly-elected COSATU  
vice-president CONNIE SEPTEMBER*

**“I am not the Women's Desk – the president  
should feel equally responsible”**

**Bulletin:** *What is your history at Rex Trueform?*

**September:** I've been a worker there since 1980. This was the first time I entered the garment industry. This was in fact my first permanent job. Before that I worked a year here and a year there. I became a shopsteward in June 1988.

**Bulletin:** *When was your first contact with the trade union movement?*

**September:** My first interaction with the trade unions was in 1983. Those were the heady days of the UDF, when we organised everyone out of the organisations that were not progressive and into organisations such as CLOWU\*. But my real face to face involvement in a proper trade union started after 1988 when we had a strike in Rex Trueform. That's the time when I was elected a shopsteward.

**Bulletin:** *What has been the most significant event or influence in your trade union involvement?*

**September:** There are two things. The one was when I took the decision to be part of the process in the Western Cape of organising clothing workers into a progressive union out of the conservative union. It was also important in the sense that we took on a really big giant. The Garment Workers Union was very big at that time.

The second event came very soon after the merger to form GAWU in 1987 (which merger I hadn't really been part of). We took a decision at Rex Trueform that we were fed up with low wages, and went on strike. The significance of that strike in 1988 was that for the first time in the history of Cape Town, and maybe even South Africa, we really took out clothing workers for a very very long time. We had 95% of the workforce totally committed to the fact that they were going to stay out, even though the employers chucked us out of the factory at some stage. We were determined to stick it out to the end to make sure we got a victory. This changed the face of the clothing industry in the Western Cape. The employers had to deal with the fact that a giant had

\* The Clothing Workers Union (CLOWU) was formed by UDF activists to challenge the long-established and conservative Garment Workers Union of the Western Cape, which had a closed shop in the garment industry. Later the GWU was taken over by progressive activists, merged with GWU (Natal) to form GAWU, which merged with ACTWUSA to form SACTWU - ed.



arisen, and workers had a new perception of trade unions – that they as workers had the right to get up and stand up.

That strike was totally outside of an agreement. The formal agreement was settled already, but we didn't want those R5 increases any more. We didn't even know what it meant to break an agreement at that time, but we had had enough!

We were about 4 000 determined workers. The vast majority were women – married women, single parents – and despite the hardships, we remained determined to stay out. We were on strike at a time when we were earning very low wages, and we could

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barely afford to be on strike for a few days – but the spirit of that strike?! Nobody went without food. It was the month of Ramadan for the Moslem people and no-one suffered. We ensured that we enriched everyone so that they could celebrate Eid.

**Bulletin:** *What impact do you think your experience of that strike, and your understanding of the problems of low paid workers, and particularly of women in low paid industries, will have on your role as an office-bearer of COSATU?*

**September:** The kind of determination shown in that strike could teach us some lessons now. We are still finding ourselves in the situation where, particularly in our industry, where there is a coincidence of low pay and women workers. It's really because people have been made to understand that sewing is a woman's job. You don't find a situation anywhere where employers employ male machinists. Whilst women have been limited to certain jobs and industries they have been stuck with low wages.

The Living Wage Campaign is not only about how everybody gets a R30 increase, but about how to address the nature and root of low wages. For example, this year in the clothing industry we have started a process which addresses grading and skills and so on. This should happen in other industries.

The question of skill is not whether you are male or female. Our argument is that a machinist is a skilled person. You can't just jump behind a sewing machine and sew up a cashmere jacket. You've got to have a skill to see how to put that button on properly.

There remain many many low paid workers, and I could draw on the kinds of things we have been putting together in SACTWU which could be a lesson for other

affiliates. For example, SACTWU's approach to overcoming low wages, particularly for women. Our approach includes the whole issue of industry restructuring. The clothing, textile and leather industry will always be affected by any economic scheme in the country. If the economy goes down, clothing and textiles goes down. All affiliates must look at their various industries and see how they can change them around so that we're not just negotiating retrenchments all the time.

The office-bearers have not allocated specific tasks yet. But the areas that I feel comfortable with are these.

**Bulletin:** *And your contribution as a woman trade unionist?*

**September:** I should not be seen as representative of women on the national office-bearers committee simply because I am a woman. People should not only relate to me when it comes

to what are termed 'women's issues'. I have been very frank about that, and I maintain that strongly. My position should be seen as the same as [president] Gomomo, the same as [general secretary] Sam and [assistant general secretary] Vavi. Whether the Federation requires us to work on Site Tax, collective bargaining, the Living Wage, or the election platform, I should be given the same opportunity to engage.

**Bulletin:** *But given that you come from a union that has organised low paid workers who also happen to be women, do you not have a particular experience to bring to bear, and a special contribution to make in relation to those two constituencies (low paid*

*workers and women) who tend to be under-represented in COSATU structures? Is there not a constituency out there which is looking to you to raise issues which are specific to women – a constituency which is a third of the Federation's membership?*

**September:** Whilst I've made the point that I should not be seen as the 'Womens Desk' on the office-bearers committee, we obviously can't dismiss the fact that this is the first time in COSATU since its inception in 1985 that COSATU has managed to elect a woman office-bearer.

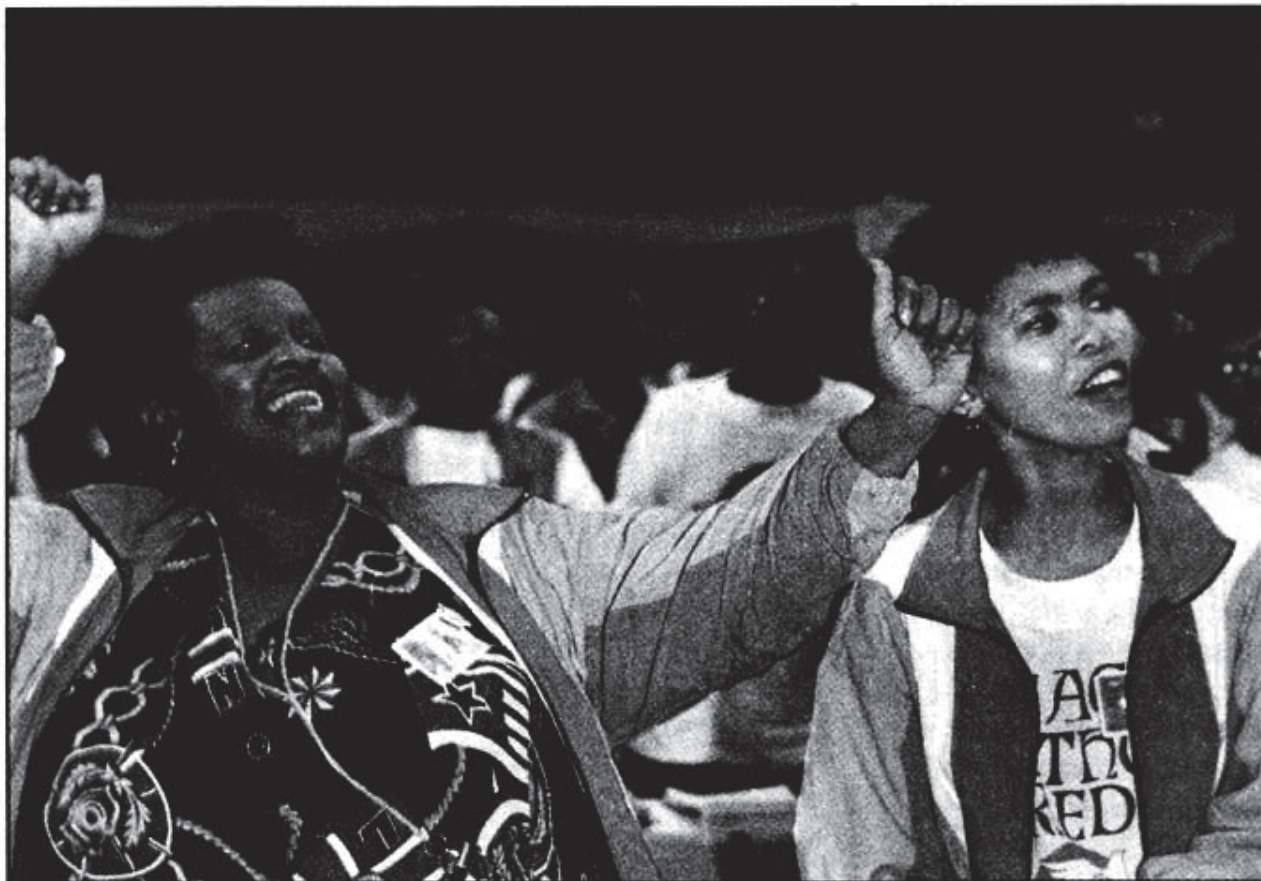
Firstly, it has been said that women don't have confidence and that they cannot participate in certain things in the organisation. I think women should feel encouraged that we are now beginning to enter the domain that was previously predominantly male. Instead of looking at just one person, the women should now feel encouraged to ask

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the question of how we can ensure that many others follow.

Secondly, there are undoubtedly certain areas in the Federation that I won't be shy to talk about. COSATU is not rid of certain attitudes and I cannot see myself keeping quiet about that. I cannot see myself accepting that I should shut up when it comes to these things.

Thirdly, I would be very interested to see that COSATU continues on a much more developed and rigorous programme. We shouldn't be relaxed now that we've got one woman office-bearer and think that COSATU has now got total liberation. I think COSATU has got to develop a more intense programme on the grass roots level to empower women. I don't favour the idea



*Giving voice to new constituencies*

of nagging about these things all the time. I favour the idea that we've got to put things into practice and create space and opportunities for women.

**Bulletin:** *What sort of ideas do you have in this regard?*

**September:** I can use examples from my own union. My union is predominantly women, but we had a situation not too long ago where all structures were just males. The union took a very conscious clear decision about overcoming this.

The same goes for COSATU. Instead of giving all the women's issues to Connie, the President should feel equally responsible. Our argument is that you must make sure that each and every member of COSATU, each and every official, each and every office-bearer, must take it as his or her responsibility to address the backlog that exists in the Federation in the area of women workers. Our argument is that it is not only certain people's responsibility. It is

everybody's. We must have a situation where John Gomomo gets up in a meeting and raises particular things. There should never be a situation such as arose in the most recent COSATU Congress where I was asked by the office-bearers "Connie what are they doing down there?", when I knew they were whistling at me and whatever else.

If I come back to the programme that we have developed in SACTWU, it was a programme which has the power and support of the powerful structures of the union.

We have to look at what COSATU is doing for women at the factory level. Addressing the problem by simply putting up women office-bearers is not the only solution.

**Bulletin:** *I would agree that it is important to find ways that everyone takes responsibility, but do you not see a role for some structures which are separate but integrated into that overall approach? Structures which bolster the*

**confidence of women? For example, the COSATU Womens Forum?**

**September:** Formerly in COSATU you had a situation where the Forum met on its own in the hopes that it would affect the affiliates. Now that the Forum also reports to the Exco and CEC and brings the issues there, the issues have been brought to the heart of COSATU.

We've got to exhaust the constitutional structures to make sure things happen. It is these structures in any union or the Federation that empower the organisation to take on x, y and z.

A sub-committee on the other hand can ensure that the decisions taken are carried out. The argument is not to do away with separate structures. My argument is that there is space for both.

We are now over the argument about whether there should be a separate structure or not. At the next COSATU Congress we should debate what has been the significance of the programme that has been developed in the Federation. We must critically analyse whether COSATU has made any significant changes, and what should now be embarked upon.

**Bulletin:** *On a different note: at the National Womens Conference in 1992, SACTWU opposed a motion that COSATU should support the right of women to have abortions, on the grounds that the issue needed to be taken back into structures. This position was carried in the conference. So far as I'm aware there has not been further discussion within the Federation. Has there been more discussion within SACTWU itself and what is your own personal view on the question of*

**abortion?**

**September:** We have had limited further discussion. In the gender programme we adopted in our NEC in October last year, one of the key things included was that we must have debates and discussions at regional and local level about abortion. Abortion in South Africa has been used in a very strange way.

People are either for or against, and the issue has been clouded by the church and by this stupid government which has its own idea about what is good for women and for kids. My personal opinion is that I favour the right to choose. This takes on board the legalisation of abortion, and it takes on board the question of choice.

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**Bulletin:** *Finally, do you think your election has any special significance for coloured workers in the Federation?*

**September:** My election gave coloured workers in the Western Cape a big boost. There was a perception amongst garment workers that the union and the federation were at the end of the day really for African workers. Now they see in practice the principle of non-racialism. ☆

**Connie September**

- is 34 years old
- has a daughter aged 15 at high school
- grew up in Grassy Park and Lotus River, Cape Town
- was elected shopsteward at Rex Trueform in 1988, and vice-chairperson of Western Cape region of SACTWU in 1989
- has been National treasurer of SACTWU from 1990