

Editor recalls the battles

Merle hard at work



1974-1983

The Bulletin's continued survival has depended on the dedication and commitment of a number of people over the years, including the editors who have had to work under some rather trying conditions. The **Labour Bulletin** interviews former editor **Merle Favis** (1979-1981) who recalls the hot debates which engulfed the labour movement in the early years.

Labour Bulletin: What were your first impressions of the Labour Bulletin?

Merle Favis: I arrived at the offices of the Labour Bulletin and I got a shock. The office, given to us by Fosatu to utilise, was no larger than a broom cupboard. It was known as a rat hole and was actually a converted bathroom and was about 1,5m by 2m. A few years after that I was given a proper room (see picture) and Fosatu gave us access to a number of people to assist in the production of the Bulletin. But until that point I had to do everything and basically worked 18 hours a day. We would receive articles in the post or delivered to us and then I would edit them

with a red pen. Thereafter, I would have to negotiate each and every change with the author and if the article was 'sensitive' or had political implications, I would have to also consult with the board members.

Labour Bulletin: What about editorial independence?

Merle Favis: In those times I did not have real editorial freedom to just publish articles. This was in particular reference to articles covering ideologically contentious issues. In those days the labour movement and the Labour Bulletin was continuous. Therefore, if a contentious article was published it would ricochet throughout the labour movement. One has to remember that in the late 1970s early 80s there was no progressive press to talk about and the Labour Bulletin was one of a kind. Anything written in the Bulletin had implications for the labour movement. The stakes were high. There were a lot of people in the Fosatu mould who felt that an overt association with politics or anything to do with the ANC would induce a state crackdown on the union movement. This in fact did occur and after the death of Neil Aggett there appeared to be a conservative shift. The Bulletin was at the heart of all these contentious debates hence, the sensitivity around what was published.

Labour Bulletin: What kind of debates are we talking about?

Merle Favis: One has to remember that we are talking about the days when, a person in the Eastern Cape was convicted and jailed for having a coffee mug with the words ANC on it. It was during this time when the ideological battles in the unions were so rife. The so-called progressive movement wanted to see labour linked to political issues and the community. (That is why the Fattis and Monis strike was such a breakthrough for the labour movement). However, there was a

group in Fosatu who argued against a link between the labour movement and political issues or community-based mobilisation. People like Alec (Erwin) were against this. I remember the many conversations we used to have on the balcony in Central Court over this issue. He was very strong about not wanting any connection to politics and a number of editorial board members supported this view. Hence, on the one side there were people like Alec, Johnny, Jabu and Halton Cheadle and on the other side there were the Mawu people.

The differences, which emerged, could partly be attributed to the fact that the politics in Durban was on another level to what was happening in other parts of the country. In other parts workers were becoming involved in community issues as increasingly working class communities took up broader struggles. So sitting in Durban the perspective was different and people like Alec and Johnny were powerful union leaders and had a powerful influence on the union movement. The Bulletin was in the heart of this debate and the registration debate while Eddie (Webster) tried to ensure unity was maintained in the Bulletin.

Labour Bulletin: How did the labour movement view the Bulletin?

Merle Favis: Initially it came out of the belly of Fosatu and it was viewed as 'our own'. Fosatu gave us offices and staff etc. But later as dynamics changed and the Bulletin started to reflect a 'non-Fosatu' dynamic or rather other struggles taking place in the country which did not involve Fosatu that a distance was created. This distance was entrenched when the Bulletin moved out of Fosatu's office in Central Court, Gale Street.

LB

Favis was detained in 1981 for five months for her connection with ANC work. During her detention Jeremy Baskin was acting editor.