

Knowing the past to understand the future



FROM THE EDITOR

2004 has certainly been a year of celebrating and commemorating a number of important milestones aside from the first decade of the democracy. Those readers involved in the emerging labour movement and related anti-apartheid struggles during the early 1970s would recall that this year marks the 30th anniversary of the South African Labour Bulletin.

This edition seeks to capture and record the Bulletin's rich history so that it is not squandered and forgotten. The origins of the Bulletin lie in the re-emergence of working class action and organisation in Durban in the early 1970's. During 1973, a group of sympathetic trade unionists, students and academics from the University of Natal (Durban), inaugurate the Institute for Industrial Education (IIE), which sought to educate workers around trade unionism and understand the socio-economic environment in which they operated. It was out of this initiative that the Labour Bulletin emerged. A working group appointed to manage the day-to-day affairs of the IIE was also involved in planning the Bulletin. They included Omar Badsha, Halton Cheadle, Fozia Fisher, Dave Hemson, Eddie Webster and Harriet Bolton. However, a key driving force behind the Bulletin was banned political science lecturer from the University of Natal, Richard Turner. The Bulletin was not conceived as a mere academic exercise. It was directly linked to the emerging of labour movement and was concerned both to record its struggles and serve its needs.

Going through the hundreds of editions published since 1974 one can get a sense of the Bulletin's contribution to both the labour movement and strengthening civil society as a whole. It became a platform for debate on all types of issues confronting both the labour movement and broader anti-apartheid organizations. What is so striking and of

some concern in relation to the current environment is that everything was contested and challenged - whether it be the decision to register, affiliation to the UDF, adopt the Freedom Charter, the future of socialism and the tripartite alliance. Nothing was taken for granted and the space existed for such debate despite continuous state oppression, bannings and detentions. Ten years into our new democracy we must ensure that this space is preserved to ensure debate and contestation of ideas.

Over the last 30 years the Bulletin has been a key resource for the recording of developments both within the labour movement and labour market. Not wanting to sound too much like CNN but through all these years the Bulletin was there to capture and record a critical part of our history. It is this history, which should be celebrated, acknowledged and studied. Reviewing the old debates and challenges facing the emerging labour movement as opposed to the established trade unions of the 1970s and 80s, it becomes clear that whilst so much has changed, with a few minor amendments, we could be speaking of the current moment as former editor John Mawbey points out.

As Sociology Professor Eddie Webster says the Bulletin emerged as part of a broad oppositional movement to apartheid. 'The challenge today goes beyond the struggles of organised workers and industrial unions. We need to engage with a democratic state while facilitating the struggles of the working poor - the casual workers, the street traders, those who work in the informal economy, the unemployed. These - the losers in the new South Africa - need to find a voice and decent jobs. Whilst this is clearly a different world to the one that Turner and others were responding to when the Bulletin was launched, the goal for the Bulletin remains the same - to provide a voice and platform

not only for organized workers but what Webster calls the working poor and the marginalized.

Thirty years is a long time in the life of any publication - whether it is mainstream or progressive. 'To survive the repression of the 70s to become an independent progressive journal is something to be celebrated and nurtured', Webster says. However, the necessary condition for the success and continuation of such a project is a group of committed people who have a vision that transcends their immediate self-interest. Since its conception there was always a core group of dedicated and committed people who kept the publication alive (when other anti-apartheid publications were forced to close) so that it could fulfill its mandate to the labour movement.

This 30th anniversary edition is therefore, dedicated to those who gave of their time, energy and passion to ensure the publication survived as well as to those who had the vision to set up the Labour Bulletin like Turner and Webster and Johann Maree (who was chairman of the board for 25 years) who took up the challenge to keep it alive against some rather difficult obstacles.

Aside from those named and unnamed individuals there are a group of funders who have committed themselves over the years to ensure Turners' vision kept going. A special thanks goes to the Department of Labours' Strengthening Civil Society Fund and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) who was involved at the inception of the publication and has funded this special edition.

Last but not least the staff of the Labour Bulletin would like to wish all its readers a happy, healthy, prosperous and peaceful new year.

Renee Grawitzky
Editor