

"If we condone corruption, we are compromised"

Samwu organiser interviewed on strike

A South African Municipal Workers Union six-day strike caught the headlines recently because the demands centered on corruption. **Steve Faulkner** talked to **Dumisani Langa**, a Metro Police organiser, about the strike, about organising in the police sector, and on why it is so important to organise against corruption.

First, you must be tired after being on the front line of the strike over the last period?

Well yes, and no. Although the strike was largely successful, there is always a lot of clearing up to do afterwards, and especially to make sure that agreements are properly worded, understood and then acted upon. But it is always energising when you have a victory!

SALB readers might not know, but there are very few police forces in Africa who are organised into a union. I think at the last count there were just three countries! Do police officers as workers have special needs?

Well there is always the question of the police being seen as an essential service. People think that if the police go on strike there is going to be chaos, and so in some countries there is a ban preventing the police from being unionised, but thankfully not here.

We do have a Minimum Essential Services Agreement with the

Jo'burg Metro Council, and that means that we agree to release 474 workers from the 3 440 who took strike action to do essential tasks, and to make sure there is an emergency service available to the public. This includes making sure our own marches and demonstrations are well looked after!

Some people would say that there is a contradiction in organising the police in a union because they are used to break strikes and serve the ruling class. How do you respond to this?

One way of making sure that the police are not mis-used by our class enemies is to make them our allies, and get them into unions. Most police officers are from working-class backgrounds, they know what poverty is, they know that the police used to be used to enforce apartheid, and they know that without the support of the community they cannot do their work.

By being in the union movement, by experiencing how democratic decision-making works, police officers have realised that they are part of the working class, and that they have more in common with other workers than with anyone else. That's why the ruling class in other countries try and stop the police from being unionised!

What were the key demands of the strike in February this year? There were four key areas.

First, we wanted to ensure that everyone is treated fairly and equally and especially in terms of our disciplinary procedure.

In our view, it was being applied very inconsistently. Many managers were able to just make decisions without reference to any agreed procedures or anyone. We also, for example, have very firm evidence of some managers acting in a corrupt manner and it not being investigated. In one recent case, our member was victimised when he complained that the manager had acted in a corrupt way to issue a driving licence. We are demanding equal and fair treatment for everyone.

Our second demand arose from the fact that one of our members, a policewoman, had formally reported that she had been raped by a very senior officer. When she tried to pursue her case, she was eventually suspended. When our members heard this they were outraged. The women comrade in question is very respected, and instead of her superior being suspended and the matter investigated, she was vilified, bullied and sent on leave, as if she

was the guilty one! We therefore called for the suspension of the senior officers responsible for this travesty of justice.

Our third demand arose from the above. It became clear in the course of investigating the rape case that the most senior police officer (Chris Ngcobo) had compromised his authority and integrity by failing to respond properly. We have insisted that we must all be subjected to the same processes regardless of rank or political connections. In effect he had lost the confidence of the entire police force, and so we called for him to be suspended, and possibly redeployed to where he might be more effective.

Our final demand, was that we wanted the employers to stop recruiting retired police officers to deal with staff shortages, and rather to expand the force through proper recruitment and training. We saw this as casualisation through the back door, and we wanted it stopped.

It's well known that after six days on strike, all of your demands were met. In the present climate that is remarkable in itself, but what makes this strike very interesting is that the demands were not the usual ones about pay and direct working conditions. Why do you think the anti-corruption demands became so important to members that they were prepared to strike indefinitely for them?

I think you have to remember that as a union we have worked hard to service these members, and to instill the practices of worker control, mandates and reporting back. I think this has been a key strength of our approach.

Police officers know the

importance of procedures, of having written agreements, and of being accountable for one's actions. As we built the Samwu membership in the Metro Police I think we distinguished ourselves from other unions by being clear about these principles. More than 90% of Metro Police officers are now Samwu members. So when our employers did not follow agreed procedures, and acted improperly our members said, 'this must stop'.

There are a number of other very important considerations. Many of our members have come to realise that corruption in the police makes their work impossible. Samwu has stated from the outset that it is absolutely against corruption in any of our municipal services, and it will condemn it openly wherever it should arise.

However, as a union we also have a responsibility to make sure that when any of our members are accused of corruption, they are properly advised and represented. The combination of being in principle against corruption, and at the same time ensuring that matters are dealt with fairly and openly has definitely helped to change the attitudes towards corruption in the Metro Police.

There is also a very important gender dimension to the corruption issue. We have almost achieved gender parity in the Metro Police, and especially at the lower levels. In our recent shop steward elections, we have seen the emergence of a very dedicated and active layer of women comrades coming forward. They are courageous, and give each other support, and they have won the respect of their male counterparts.

One woman shop steward said to me the other day, "If we condone corruption, and are in anyway implicated, then we are



Suspended Johannesburg Metro Police head, Chris Ngcobo

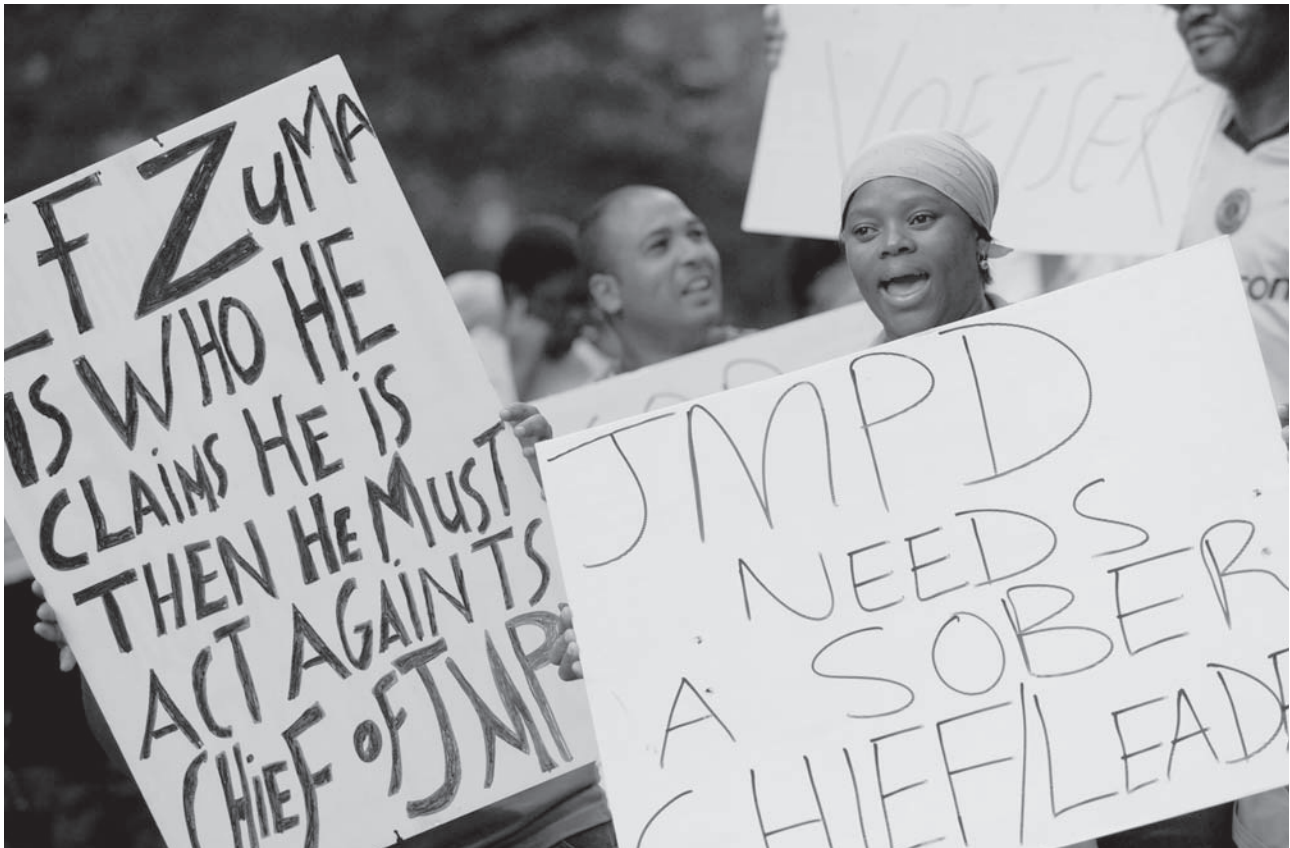
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compromised. It allows my boss to say to me, I know you take bribes, and so if you do not grant me certain sexual favours, I will report you, and you can forget about promotion."

I think this explains why so many women members were so clear about the strike and our demands. It was their way of saying, 'Enough is enough!' But it also helped to sensitise the male membership, and they could see that an injury to my sister is an injury to all!

Finally, during our successful wage claim last year, where we achieved a good settlement, it was implied that we were able to 'supplement' our incomes by taking tax-free 'donations' from the public, and therefore our wage claim was invalid. As if we were to be treated like the waiters in a restaurant who live off tips! We said that the best way to undermine corruption is to pay properly for the service. So it was clear to the members that corruption also undermines our legitimate pay claim.

Given all of these points, I would say that the overwhelming number of our members have now seen that corruption leaves them vulnerable, and that fighting against it, and



The Star

Municipal workers demonstrate in the Johannesburg city centre during the strike

exposing it, is the best way to make sure that we all benefit equally. We have started to capture the moral high ground, and the public appreciates it, and gave us their overwhelming support in the strike.

What would you say are the key lessons from the strike, and what would you like to share with Samwu and the labour movement more generally?

The first thing is that we have to give meaning to 'an injury to one is an injury to all'. We have to see that issues like rape and sexual harassment are not 'personal' but organisational and political. They have to be responded to as trade union issues like pay, or health and safety or pensions. If we don't, we will divide ourselves.

Secondly, we have to deepen the culture of workers' control. Throughout the strike there were mass mandate-making meetings and

reportbacks. There were no secret meetings or talks behind the scenes. We have to maintain workers' control on an everyday basis.

Thirdly, we had to be proactive with the media, and explain our case before we took the action, and make sure our story was the first one to appear. I think this helps to explain why the support from the public was so overwhelming.

Fourthly, we have to make sure that we have done our research and know what we are talking about. We have to be prepared in advance, and make sure, for example, that we did not leave any legal loopholes that could have been used against us. We also need to know how to use the bargaining council and other mechanisms.

Fifthly, we had to keep the rest of Samwu and the broader trade union movement informed. We had to be able to say that if our demands were not met, we would escalate the

strike, and that other sectors would support us. And the employers admitted that they could see that other workers were ready to join us! Of course we ourselves have now to be ready to support our comrades in other sectors when they need us. **LB**

All Samwu's demands were met in the strike including the suspension of Metro Police head Ngcobo; an investigation into the rape charges; the promise of equal application of disciplinary procedures; and the practice of employing mainly white pensioned police will cease.

Dumisani Langa has been branch secretary of Samwu Metro Branch since 2003. In 2000 he also became the legal coordinator of Samwu's Gauteng Province. He came to the union from the private sector, although his wife was a Samwu member. Steve Faulkner is Samwu's international officer.