



The front office consists of organising, research, bargaining and legal services. The back office is the back-up to this. It includes a good finance system and an individual membership records so the union knows what every member owes. "We need to make good procedures and policies as in future there will be bigger demands as the labour market becomes more and more fragmented. Then we will need more resources so we must

improve our finance management. In unionism you are in the unique position where you don't control your own finances. Companies who are your opposition, they won't look after your finances. You can't rely on them. Everything must finance itself"

To this end Solidarity has a well developed IT department which maintains the network of computers. It has been visited by other unions to look at its systems

although Buys points out that the programmes 'cannot work unless all the data is regularly and accurately entered.'

Solidarity's members make active use of the Internet, especially members in its more vulnerable sectors in small companies. Members are used to technology and have access to e-mail. They use e-mail to communicate with the union to have their queries answered. In places like Eskom and Denel organisers have laptops and can respond to members' queries at once. Says Buys, "We must be faster than management. We must beat them in the information game."

Solidarity's backroom services include a communications department which amongst other things tracks on a daily basis all media covering Solidarity allowing for an instant response. It also produces *Solidariteit Tydskrif* on a regular basis. The department has a translator who translates its staff's output mainly from Afrikaans to English.

IMPORTANCE OF TRAINING

Solidarity divides itself into a trade union servicing membership and what Buys calls a 'business leg'. The business leg incorporates various units including a training and personnel agency to assist retrenched members. Buys stresses that the training centre is not primarily a financial concern, although the union charges for use of its facilities, but is there to assist membership and other workers needing skills. Members pay a 'human resources' levy towards the running of its training facilities.

Buys sees Solidarity as falling into the category of 'service unionism'. "We believe unions must charge like companies as the



Solidarity's call centre at its head office

government can't provide everything. Companies have moved away from certain things in terms of benefits. We must provide, otherwise members will say 'you can't protect us' and training is one of these services. You can't only do what you did 20 years ago."

Solidarity has recently built a spacious training centre, which deals with both internal staff training and technical training for companies and the Department of Labour's Sector Education & Training Authority. If organisers see a gap in members' training, they alert the company to it and offer their training centre for the running of such courses. The centre caters for technical training of all sorts such as mechanical and computer training and typing for both the employed and unemployed. In the future it hopes to develop training for part-time and informal sector workers.

The centre falls under Solidarity's business leg and is administered by an experienced manager. The union visited about 60 colleges in the US when it was in the process of setting it up.

COMMUNITY PROJECTS

The business leg also finances and runs a number of community projects through its Helping Hand wing of which the union is very proud. It provides bursaries for members to study and train, it

contributes to feeding schemes, to *Rapport's* education fund and assists in disaster situations. It originally developed in areas where members suffered large scale retrenchments such as in Stilfontein. Helping Hand is financed by Solidarity's members who contribute 1% of their subscriptions to the fund but ultimately it hopes to establish its own financial base.

When an earthquake rocked Stilfontein in March 2005, the union quickly assisted its members who lost income for five months. In the process it realised that many of Stilfontein's 2 500 population who were non-union members were also destitute. It assisted in raising support for all of these people and launched a large feeding scheme which catered for 90 % black people.

It supports feeding schemes in primary schools and has recently solicited university research to look into who needs it most and what is the best kind of food to provide. Solidarity hopes this research will assist other feeding schemes to provide the best service. Through these schemes it hopes to develop a model of community intervention, which can be used in other areas such as providing health care for the aged.

The union believes that the state cannot provide everything and that the union must play its part. It

employs a full-time community worker to help in this. It aims to move away from a welfare model towards assisting people to help themselves. It works only on invitation and assists communities to raise money while it persuades companies to support its projects.

BARGAINING APPROACHES

The general secretary in each sector is also the chief negotiator. In a number of sectors, such as in engineering and chemical, the union negotiates in a bargaining council. In the auto sector and at the University of Stellenbosch, however, it engages in direct company or institutional bargaining.

Where necessary it cooperates with other unions, chiefly Cosatu unions. It has, for example, formed a coalition with Cosatu's Communications Workers Union (CWU) to protect worker interests at Telkom, particularly in the arena of possible retrenchments.

In 2005 Solidarity jointly struck with Cosatu's National Union of Mineworkers when they declared a wage dispute with the Chamber of Mines. In the same year it attempted to cooperate with Numsa but ended up conducting its own strike. Employers on the Metal Engineering Industry Bargaining Council initially offered a 6% across the board wage increase. Numsa, however, in an attempt to narrow the gap between high and low paid workers, pushed employers up to a 7% increase giving Solidarity's mainly white artisans and supervisors a 5% increase. Solidarity believes that once an employer offer has been tabled the union must force employers to stay with this so it insisted on the original 6% increase and struck to win it.

An important demand in all negotiations concerns training. Solidarity argues that skills



PART OF SOLIDARITY'S RESOLUTION ON "WORKER INFLATION AS ALTERNATIVE TO THE INFLATION FIGURES PROVIDED BY STATISTICS SOUTH AFRICA FOR USE IN WAGE NEGOTIATIONS"

"The following alternatives are proposed, to be used in combination or separately in the negotiation process to replace the current CPIX inflation rate:

- That Solidarity develops an alternative worker inflation rate, representative of its members. This concept has already been tested in a few industries and preliminary results have shown that the inflation rate for Solidarity members is 1,5% to 2% higher than the figures provided by Statistics South Africa.
- That the existing information from Statistics South Africa on inflation rates for various geographical areas be adapted to represent the spread of Solidarity's members within a specific industry or employed in a specific company.
- That the existing information from Statistics South Africa on inflation rates for various spending categories be adjusted to be representative of the spending categories of Solidarity members."

enhancement is critical to South Africa's development. In bargaining it demands that companies develop their employees as well as other workers in the sector. It attempts to bring people together in the training arena to coordinate efforts. It also provides about three and half million rand in educational bursaries for its members and their children. And finally its most recent initiative has been the launch of its training centre.

SOLIDARITY AND POLITICS

Solidarity emerged from right wing white unions in 2002 and, according to Buys, had to 'reposition itself'. The union has undergone many changes since its formation where, in the early days, it sought to separate itself from party politics. Comments Buys, "There are not so many contentious issues now. At congresses we look at the financial position and enjoy a cultural event."

Buys comments that many

Afrikaner and white institutions disappeared with the coming of the ANC government "so people came to us for many reasons. We took up the role because you can't cushion yourself from the external environment. We will get involved with issues seen as political. We will help to establish civil organisations but remain an independent union." Members of the union, for example, felt strongly about the renaming of Pretoria and the union, through its Helping Hand, assisted them to conduct protest action.

Although it seeks to remain independent, Solidarity has branched out to work with other unions and federations. Despite the name 'Solidarity' it does not aim to work towards unity with other labour federations, including the pending Nactu/Fedusa/Consawu merger. It believes any merger would narrow its options. It prefers the freedom to work across unions. Align itself to a particular federation would be a constraint.

"We work with everyone," declares Buys, "We won't get involved or make an alliance with any political party. We don't want to position ourselves against other federations. For example, on the training issue we take part in joint negotiations. The only problem in not being part of a federation is that we cannot participate in Nedlac (National Economic Development & Labour Council). But we make up for this by making representations to portfolio committees in parliament and liaising with state departments. I believe there are two models of trade unionism. Depending on the state or being a self sufficient union. We believe in a 'self-standigheid' (self-sufficiency/do-it yourself) culture."

Buys asserts, "We will talk to a company about training but we will also set up our own things. We want to take responsibility for ourselves, share the responsibility with government and companies. Unions must do more." ■

In pursuit of greater unity

The NUM and other South African trade unions have an impressive history of unity in struggle. **Frans Baleni** looks at how some officials are eroding this heritage and of the necessity to examine this problem in order to better serve membership.

In order to clarify the role of union officials or cadres, it is important to define the purpose of a trade union. A union is a collective organisation of wage and salary earners who come together in order to protect and improve their standard of living. It is, therefore, a class organisation and is perpetually engaged in a class struggle with employers. This definition, therefore, describes trade unions as a phenomenon of capitalism. For, only in capitalist societies are there free labour market conditions, where the

majority of people are compelled to sell their labour power to the minority of owners who own the means of production. Therefore, anyone who works for a trade union has to work towards the advancement of class struggle otherwise he or she is operating against the purpose of the organisation.

A union's primary aim in the class struggle must be to increase and maintain the solidarity of its members, because it is collective strength and not reason that determines the outcome. Unity is strength, kopano ke matla. No person whether they are a member or official can be permitted to destroy or damage this unity. This is seen most clearly during strikes when strike breakers are directly or indirectly persuaded to join the strike. Anyone who attempts to destroy the solidarity of a union is betraying its cause. There are no times or occasions when there are exceptions to this.

HISTORY OF STRUGGLE AND OPPORTUNISM

The history of trade unions in South Africa has gone through three main phases. The first phase was mainly based on the formation of craft unions, which were white. The second phase was the formation of black unions. The third phase was when black unions played an important political role in the absence of a political voice after bannings and repression of political

organisations in the mid-1980s. This period was characterised by the formation of general unions that ultimately came together to form the federation Cosatu (Congress of South African Trade Unions). The importance of this phase was that there was a consolidation of an organised working class, searching for unity with a purpose. It is clear that progressive trade unions played an important role in dismantling apartheid.

As the unions got bigger and the class struggle became more complex, individual members and leaders found their tasks more demanding and difficult. Then the unions saw a need to employ specialist services, such as accountants, economists, legal officers and so on. These functionaries are not special or different from the rest of union officials. They are part of the intellectual capacity in the labour movement.

In pursuit of greater unity and as a response to the complex challenges facing organised labour, the NUM (National Union of Mineworkers) re-positioned itself. For example, we were the first union to have a full-time president and recently the entire National Office Bearers have become full-time union workers as well as all those serving on the National Executive Committee. This was done to capacitate working class cadreship in order to confront complex challenges.



NUM workers show solidarity during their strike in 1987

It is an undisputed fact that officials have interests that are subordinate to the primary aims of the union members. The most important rule for a union is that the union belongs entirely to its members. No other interests should be allowed to intrude. The NUM constitution makes a clear distinction between union members, leadership and staff in terms of their authority in the union. However, there is confusion about the role of staff versus elected leaders. This confusion is compounded by the abuse of trust and respect given by members to officials. The abuse takes the form of misinformation, slandering and denigrating of other officials and the leadership to advance personal interests.

In some instances, some officials join the unions simply as a career move, for personal reasons without any understanding of trade unionism or commitment to the

labour movement. Consequently they may have no regard for the need for solidarity and be ignorant about the imperatives of the class struggle. Therefore, working for the progressive labour movement is just another job to them.

Comrades, there will always be differences and arguments in the union over the nature of its policies. Essentially this is about different perceptions of class. These differences should always be debated as challenges for policy formulations and not personalities.

END OF APARTHEID AND EMERGING PROBLEMS

The problem began mainly as the political struggle against apartheid ended. During the apartheid years the minds of everyone employed by the union was focused on attacking the apartheid system. Even those who knew little about trade unionism saw the need for solidarity in those years. There

were, moreover, no political or financial rewards to be gained. Indeed, exposure in NUM was more likely to result in arrest, harassment, detention, including personal difficulties such as delaying a marriage, than anything else. Everybody was committed and focused on the main objective.

During this period no one would have contemplated slandering any of the union leadership or challenging their right to be there. Political differences were subsidiary to the need to fight apartheid. There were differences, of course, as was seen in the Secunda and Westonaria regions, but they were containable. Careerism and opportunism for material gain was scarce in this period. As Fidel Castro has pointed out there is the challenge of finding a technical solution to the problem of overriding personal gain.

From 1992 onwards, the focus on solidarity disappeared and a whole range of occupational, financial and

political opportunities opened up. These opportunities were beyond our imagination and it has released the worst, as well as the best, in comrades. Unfortunately, because there was no serious political education, class struggle consciousness was shallow. There was no longer a single unifying objective either for union members or officials. It became an open season for individualism. The union was not prepared for this.

This new environment will continue until extensive provisions for class education are made. The problem, therefore, has to be tackled by the labour movement in general. Some of these problems are caused by:

- Union officials who see their jobs purely in personal terms without any regard for their members' interests.
- The scope for intolerant behaviour provided by the union's open structure and democratic procedures that would never be allowed even in a business environment.
- Discussions that define political differences in terms of personalities rather than policies.
- The absence of a clear understanding of the purpose of trade unionism and, therefore, of the primary and overriding need for solidarity.
- Lack of understanding that there is always antagonism between the two main classes of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie.

This situation requires political discipline and clearly understood procedures and roles without infringing the democratic rights of members and officials. There have to be clear opportunities created to debate policies, to challenge the actions of the leadership and to

involve ordinary members in the affairs of the union.

These are some suggestions that could be considered to address the above issues. The union should insist that every person employed by the union should undergo an induction course around the meaning of trade unionism, the significance of class analysis, an understanding of the union constitution and the rights and responsibilities of members, leadership and staff. We need to eliminate the culture of belittling and unfairly criticising other people and rather concentrate on debating policies. Comrades need to remember that while the union is a democratic organisation it is also a fighting entity. It has, therefore, to be tightly organised and disciplined as well as democratic. The contradiction in this requirement bedevils trade unions.

NEED TO REMEMBER

Members need a trade union which is tightly organised and fights to protect the collective against employers and government where necessary. NUM is an important structure in the struggle for progressive policies in South Africa against the influence of the IMF, the World Bank and the dominant Western industrial countries. We should never undermine the strength of our enemies. They are experts in corruption, betrayal, manipulation, promoting divisions and destruction.

The salary and wage officials earn a voluntary contribution by members of NUM who have sacrificed their lungs to rock dust to pay us. They have accepted that death is in view at any time. These workers sweat in the heat of the bowel of the earth, stand in the direct sun heat and endure cold

winter days, while working on electrical lines, constructing buildings or roads.

Our members have died in defence of this union. Some are still unemployed since the 1987 strike when they fought for the very existence of this union. Orphans and widows are being made constantly because of unsafe working conditions while employers pursue higher profits. While these widows and orphans are left without resources, we are assured of our monthly income and are sometimes engaging in issues which are not taking the struggle forward.

We should remember those who struggled for our movement such as E Mofutsanyana, JB Marks, M Kotane, OR Tambo, J Slovo, Chris Hani - the list is endless. We should be inspired and recharged by the spirit of Selby Mayise, Sam Tambane, Jeffrey Njuza, Morebodi Selepe, Elijah Barayi and others.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it would be good to learn from what comrade Thomas Sankara said in our industry wide strike in August 1987, "The tasks that lie ahead of us are many and complex. We will need more courage, more conviction, and more determination to keep marching forward. The enemies of our people and revolution are working with redoubled energy and ingenuity to bar our road forward. Opportunism is like the counterrevolution, it is a thornbush habitually found in the path of revolution. We must firmly commit ourselves to the permanent defence of a correct line that will take us towards our final goal."

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