

Independence and 'self-standigheid'

Solidarity where (mainly) white workers gather

Solidarity is the fastest growing trade union in South Africa. It currently has 130 000 members with more than 2 000 joining every month.

SALB interviewed **Flip Buys**, its general secretary, and toured its head office to find out what makes this mainly Afrikaans union tick.

Solidarity has recently moved into a smart new head office in the southern suburbs of Pretoria. Formerly Kumba offices, it now accommodates the union's all white staff in spacious, well furnished offices. Solidarity has come a long way since it was formed in 2002 when several old white unions merged and staff were squashed into overcrowded offices. The largest of these unions was Die Mynwerkers Unie (Mineworkers Union) with 30 000 members and the South African Union brought in a further 17 000. Previously these

unions had been reduced by about 65 000 members through large-scale retrenchments in companies such as Eskom, Telkom and in the mining industry.

SOLIDARITY'S MEMBERSHIP

Currently 80% of Solidarity's members are white and many who were formerly not in unions have now joined. These include university lecturers and white-collar workers in the service and other sectors of the economy. Although it organises all grades, its members are mainly skilled and educated.

Its largest sector is in iron, steel and engineering with 33 000 members followed by mining where it has 18 000 members. It also has members in Eskom, telecommunications, chemical, electrical and in a general category which includes commercial, education and research. It is the largest recognised union in Mittal Steel and the second largest in Eskom and Sasol. It has members in 9 800 companies and formal shop steward representation in 1 000 of these.

The union recruits mainly people who speak Afrikaans. As Buys says, "The Afrikaans language is important. We believe, as stated in the constitution, in people's right to their own language. Our members see Afrikaans as very important. We send e-mails out in Afrikaans and 50% of our magazine *Solidariteit Tydskrif* is in Afrikaans [the other half is in English]."



Flip Buys

HOW SOLIDARITY ORGANISES

Solidarity organises across every sector as if it was a federation. Each of its larger sectors, such as steel and engineering, has its own general secretary who liaises with organisers in Solidarity's 20 regional offices. All services however are centralised at its head office in Kloofsig near Pretoria.

The union is headed by an overarching general secretary, Flip Buys. He is assisted by two deputy general secretaries, Dirk Hermann who manages administration and Piet du Plooy who oversees bargaining issues.



Solidarity members at a recent congress

The union holds monthly General Councils with representatives from its different industries and each industry holds an annual congress. Representatives from these sectors also come together once a year in a national congress which is attended by shop stewards. Resolutions are forwarded from industry congresses and national policy taken. The union thus holds about seven congresses in a year. Buys believes in holding a full congress annually as it is 'an important social event for members.' At the congress awards are given to members such as those who helped in the Stilfontein crisis or assist feeding projects.

The union raises money for these events through functions where celebrities, like Afrikaans pop singer Steve Hofmeyer, sing. Well known rugby players have also assisted the union with recruiting members.

At Solidarity's most recent national congress in March an interesting resolution on 'Workers' Inflation' was taken. It contends that the existing information from Statistics South Africa on inflation rates for various spending categories should be adjusted to represent the spending categories of Solidarity members. This should result in 'workers' inflation' rather

than consumer inflation (CPIX) being used as a basis for wage negotiations. Workers' inflation measures the specific inflation rate applicable to employees. The rationale is that the workers' inflation is not the same as the national average and the union does not negotiate on behalf of all South Africans but on behalf of employees (see box on p29).

Shopstewards are elected every five years and training them is a large part of Solidarity's activities. It employs a full-time trainer who conducts basic and specialist training.

The largest department in head office is the organising department, followed by the legal department. It employs 26 people in the legal department, 20 of whom are based at head office and the other six regionally.

A research department employing highly educated researchers and two economists supports the organising department. The legal department deals with some 1 300 cases a year and every legal person has their own administrator. The head office also houses a health and safety section staffed with experts.

The union runs a well developed call centre that is primarily aimed at servicing its general sector, which does not have its own organising personnel. The centre is also however used by membership from other sectors of the union who phone with queries about such things as the Eskom pension fund or the progress of a court case. The call centre employs 12 people situated in two different venues. The one centre is staffed entirely by blind people who require a venue with easy access.

Both centres take calls, answer

queries and log the caller's details and queries onto computer. Where the operator cannot answer a query the call is referred across to an economist, legal person or someone with the information required. Besides guaranteeing specialist information, this also ensures that callers do not have to wait long periods for the phone to be answered. New members can join over the phone where their details, including financial, and membership and subscription deduction, are taken immediately. In 2005 the union took 70 000 calls.

Buys stresses that call centres do not replace the important function of personal contact with organisers and shop stewards. The call operators immediately alert regional organisers by e-mail, for example in Richard's Bay, of the member's query and they are expected to follow it up. If the member is dissatisfied he/she can again contact the call centre.

Buys considers a union call centre highly innovative. On a recent trip to the US, unions Solidarity visited were intrigued to hear about their call centre as they had no such service of their own.

The union believes in a very strong 'back office' to support its 'front office'. It contends that in this it is different from Cosatu unions although they both receive similar membership fees and Cosatu's are sometimes higher. "The back office service platform must be superb and organisers must have this backing. We must be efficient because we are dealing with people's second most important thing after life - their work," comments Buys. "Members are used to a service culture in our fast society so they expect more from the union."