

# Indian teachers challenge SADTU

**A**rticles on South African trade unions in the education sector often focus on the struggle between SADTU and the state, the position of temporary teachers and wage-related issues

While these are important issues that need to be analysed it is also important to gain an understanding of other challenges which SADTU needs to address in order to ensure strong and effective union structures. This article outlines and discusses some internally generated challenges confronting SADTU.

In a life history study done on the work experiences of 40 Indian teachers in the Witwatersrand during the post-apartheid period, it is evident that serious tensions exist between Indian members of SADTU and the union's leadership.

The findings from this research suggest that SADTU must also address two teacher concerns that have been generated by the social transformation of the 1990s. The first centres around feelings of ethnic marginalisation experienced by some Indian teachers. The second teacher concern centres around the claims of victimisation by those SADTU members who occupy principalship posts in schools.

## Tension with leadership

The *South African Labour Bulletin* vol 21 no 3 discussed how increasing

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*SADTU faces new challenges brought about by social transformation. Sabera Surtee identifies organisational problems Indian members have with SADTU.*

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bureaucratisation within SADTU and its perceived relationship to the state has created a vacuum between the SADTU leadership and its rank and file. These views are supported by Indian teachers in the Witwatersrand area. These teachers think that the post-apartheid state has co-opted SADTU leadership and that this has caused the leaders to abandon the interests of teachers. Indian teachers also express great concern at how many of their elected SADTU leaders have been drawn into ANC government structures and that this has led to the undermining of SADTU.

One teacher comments: 'I think the top brass are not committed enough to the union. We've had good people on the top. What happens? They get a top job at the ANC. All this training, all this experience, all their expertise that is built up over the years .. [gets lost]. Now, when it's time for them to use this for the betterment of the union, they quit to go into the ANC. I feel



*'Teachers must just teach, teach, teach...'*

that it shows that there's not enough commitment to the union'

Indian teachers also comment on the growing bureaucratisation of SADTU and how this is creating a distance between the union's leadership and its rank and file. Two Indian teachers explain: 'We never know what's happening within the SADTU branch. There's that lack of communication. I mean if you watch the news you always hear SADTU has taken up this proposal. But we as teachers, we're not even aware of what is happening. I think the staff has pulled back in the sense that they feel SADTU is doing nothing for them. I mean, if we are paying members then we shouldn't just be a statistic. They should take us into consideration.'

'[Teachers]... Are just being overlooked... [by SADTU]. They should have ordinary teachers from schools, get them together, and consult with them when they're drawing up these education

policies. Nobody consults with teachers. Which teachers did they go to? Which schools did they go to? How were these policies drawn up? Even if they did consult with the teachers who were they? We know nothing about what's going on in... education. Teachers are just like ordinary workers like you get in these big car plants. Those workers are just assembling those cars - they are not consulted... We're not consulted on anything. We must just teach, teach, teach!'

It is clear from these statements that the Indian teachers interviewed hold negative views of SADTU. These teachers see SADTU as being an undemocratic organisation that is in cahoots with the ANC government at the expense of its rank and file.

### **Ethnic marginalisation**

Some Indian teachers are worried about SADTU's multi-racial composition. During the apartheid era, Indian teachers largely

belonged to teacher organisations which were organised along racial lines. The social and political transformation of the 1990s period has generated a dilemma amongst some Indian teachers regarding their ethnic status within SADTU.

The following quote shows that some Indian teachers believe that Indians, as a minority group, are being marginalised by African teachers in SADTU: '[with]... SADTU being one body now, we as Indian teachers, . . . Are totally out-numbered, no matter what your grievances are. So your voice is really hardly heard'

'[SADTU is]... representing us ..but they are at the same time trying to do a little extra for the black guy... From an Indian and let's say even from a coloured point of view, our groups are just staying there in the middle. So within that body, more power is being held by the black South African's'

Another teacher expresses his dissatisfaction at SADTU's failure to be sensitive to the different experiences of black South African teachers who come from different ethnic groups. 'The problem that I have with SADTU is that SADTU can't really represent the interests of all their teachers, because we are teachers from different departments and we operated from different levels. I mean the problems that Indian teachers may have encountered, the black teacher didn't encounter in the townships. There are problems that the black teacher encountered that we didn't encounter... SADTU should... [therefore]... look at regions, or at the areas and see where the problems are and try and isolate the problems that are relevant to that particular area, and try and highlight it... until such time that the playing field is level. Then of course you can say right now we have a common problem.'

These quotes suggest that social

transformation during the post-apartheid period has led to a rise of an ethnic identity amongst Indian teachers. During the apartheid era, Indian teachers regarded themselves together with African and coloured teachers, as all being the victims of the same political system. This led to the formation of a common 'black' identity amongst these three groups.

With the end of apartheid, ethnic differences and ethnic identity are becoming more important to the Indian teachers who were interviewed. The feelings of ethnic marginalisation expressed by some of the teachers in this study show that there is clearly a need for SADTU to address the new forms of group identity which have been brought about by social transformation. SADTU needs to examine how these 'non-class' identities impact on its ability to effectively organise its members from diverse ethnic, race and gender backgrounds.

### Principal's problems

During the apartheid period, Indian teacher organisations that were granted recognition status by the education authorities, protected the interests of principals rather than those of ordinary teachers. During this period, Indian schools were characterised by oppressive and bureaucratic forms of control. The education authorities and the recognised Indian teacher organisations allowed school principals to be 'controllers or managers'.

These managerial practices were challenged with the new educational dispensation in the post-apartheid period and the emergence of SADTU.

Oppressive and bureaucratic managerial practices in the formerly Indian schools were then officially removed and not recognised. Some SADTU members who hold managerial posts have concerns with

this new situation. Some Indian school principals accuse the SADTU leadership and its members who are teachers, of now victimising members who hold managerial posts

The following extracts from an interview show the feelings of some Indian school principals who argue that a serious tension exists between managers on the one hand, and teachers and SADTU on the other: '... [if you give a teacher a low score after a classroom inspection]...

The disgruntled teacher becomes an ardent member of SADTU. SADTU's first target in order to get teachers' support is that they attack principals. They feel the principals are the lackeys of the department... when SADTU wants to attack people they attack the principal first.'

SADTU needs to address the concerns of SADTU members who hold principalship positions, if the union is to ensure unity and strong organisation amongst the different sections of its rank and file. SADTU should outline its position on members in different grades and positions, to guard against conflict amongst its membership and the resulting loss of some of its members to other teacher organisations

### Conclusion

It is clear that if SADTU is to ensure strong organisation amongst its membership the three problems outlined above will have



*Indian teachers want to strengthen democratic processes in SADTU.*

to be addressed. SADTU has already identified a growing rift between the union's leadership and its rank and file, brought about by the increasing bureaucratisation of the union. To deal with this, SADTU leadership has proposed the implementation of teacher forums to bridge the gap between itself and its members.

The interviews done with Indian teachers suggest that SADTU should research and address the issues of ethnic marginalisation and the disunity amongst teachers created by occupational stratification. Both of these workplace issues have been specifically generated by South Africa's transition from an apartheid to a post-apartheid society. If SADTU can address these issues successfully, it will stand as a good example to other unions facing the same problems. ★

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