

Trade union unity, and the problem of factory floor divisions between Indian and African workers has been the subject of much debate. CWIU organiser HASSAN AMRA investigates the organisation of Indian workers in different sectors and draws some lessons.

indians *and* africans: *workers* divided?

Management divide-and-rule strategies

Management strategies over the apartheid years have played a large role in dividing Indians from their fellow African workers. The way industry has organised itself has entrenched divisions between different groups. The employment of Indian workers into more skilled, higher grade jobs has entrenched a racial identity. This has reinforced the different political and social experiences of Indians and Africans under apartheid.

Indian workers often have a higher level of education and skill, and see themselves as superior to African workers. Management has recognised the advantage of a divided workforce, and uses intimidatory tactics to discourage Indian workers from joining trade unions. Organisers and shopstewards give examples of such tactics:

- "They (management) send messages to workers via supervisors or senior personnel to the artisans and monthly paid workers that they would not qualify to join the union because they are skilled workers. They tell these workers that they need specialist unions or must form consultative

committees where they could directly represent themselves to management."

- "Your wage increases will be retarded because you are in the minority, and the union will concentrate on the lower waged workers so you will lose."
- "You cannot join the African workers union, you come from a different cultural background."
- "The African unions are militant and unreasonable in their demands, and they often embark on illegal strike action, you will be forced to join the strike, and we will not be obliged to keep you on, we might even have to close down the factory."

Other management tactics include undermining the bargaining process. After wages have been negotiated by African workers, Indian workers are often granted a percentage or so higher increase so management nurtures the loyalties of Indian workers.

Despite these tactics, some unions have successfully united Indian and African workers. Experience varies from sector to sector.

Indians in the teaching sector

Schools are racially divided so Indian teachers only come in contact with other Indians. This is different from other sectors and has made united action with other racial groups very difficult. The formation of the non-racial SADTU (SA Democratic Teachers Union) however, has enabled teachers of different ethnic groups to come together.

The recruitment numbers into the recently formed SADTU in the greater Durban area are significant. Some 5 500 teachers are members of the union, of which 4 500 are Indian teachers. There has been a significant increase in Indian membership since union recognition by the House of Delegates in October 1992 – teachers are less afraid of victimisation by the department. Also, at the launch of SADTU the predominance of ANC aligned teachers kept teachers of different persuasions away. But since the chalk down of teachers in Soweto last year, non-members are starting to see SADTU as politically independent.

The quality of service offered by the union has also improved. A union official pointed out “more members tend to join the union after gains have been made at site level. When you win a disciplinary case, for example, the non-union members assess the effectiveness of the organisation and if they are satisfied that the quality of service is of a high standard, they would sign up for membership.”

The petroleum sector

The petrochemical sector in the Durban area employs an equal number of Indian and African workers. The sector is organised by the CWIU (Chemical Workers Industrial Union) and the membership is a replica of the workforce – 50% of each race group. An Indian shopsteward explained: “the company employed people on the basis of high educational standards. They did not divide workers according to race, at least on the face of it there was no racial criteria of selection or of promotion. However, there is concern amongst the workers because it cannot be justified how all the foreman are

either whites or Indian.”

Union recruitment started in the mid-80s and it was African workers who joined. Indian recruitment only really began after union recognition, and substantial gains had been made with wages and working conditions. According to one shopsteward: “For the first time the Indian workers from the refinery saw that African workers from the Island View site were negotiating their own conditions of employment, whereas previously we just had to accept what the bosses gave us.”

The recruitment of Indian workers was not without effort. Recruiters had to constantly dispel the issue of racial identity. A shopsteward explained: “From the initial drive we went in strong explaining to the Indian workers that it is only because of the relative size of the Indian population that the union has a majority of African membership. If the workforce of this country was mainly Indian workers, the majority of the union membership would have been Indian. We also emphasised that we are not only fighting a racial struggle against unjust apartheid, but that workers have their own interests to protect and so we are fighting a class struggle. We managed to convince the Indian workers that it was senseless to have many specialist unions representing us, and that one strong and united union would be able to do the job more effectively.”

But once recruited, Indian workers have been as militant as African workers. When workers embark on strike action their unity does not falter. Through joint economic struggle, workers have come to see the divisive nature of hanging onto racial identities.

The textile and clothing sector

Workers in the clothing industry in Durban are about 70% Indian. The industry is organised by SACTWU (SA Clothing & Textile Workers Union) and its membership is about 50% Indian and 50% African.

The organisations that came together to form SACTWU had divergent traditions. The



Garment workers: the formation of SACTWU was preceded by clashes between Indian and African workers as ACTWUSA and GAWU tried to organise the same workers

Photo: William Matlala

unions that finally merged to form SACTWU were the Amalgamated Clothing & Textile Workers Union of SA (ACTWUSA) and the Garment & Allied Workers Union (GAWU). ACTWUSA came from the merging of African based unions where the dominant tradition was that of the COSATU affiliated NUTW with a history of strong shopfloor organisation. GAWU came from the merging of two TUCSA (Trade Union Council of SA) affiliated unions with a tradition of racially based closed shops of Indian and coloured membership with low levels of militancy.

These different traditions led to shopfloor clashes. Even at the time of merger talks members of ACTWUSA and GAWU clashed on the shopfloor. Although the conflict took on a racial character, the underlying reason was the poaching of members. According to one official: "There were a lot of problems between Indian and African workers when ACTWUSA attempted to organise in the same

factories where GAWU had a presence. In certain factories the conflict between Indian workers in GAWU and African workers in ACTWUSA reached a level where physical violence erupted."

The birth of SACTWU did not bring immediate resolution to this conflict. At a factory in Durban, for example, a series of workshops were run to forge unity amongst workers. A SACTWU member said: "The Indian and African workers learned to understand each other more. This was mainly due to the education programmes and the training of the leadership. Since the formation of SACTWU the relationship between the Indian and African workers got very much better, and we have experienced no incidence of racial division."

The tradition now that seems to dominate SACTWU is the more militant ACTWUSA one – Indian workers have learnt the benefits of strong factory floor organisation.

The municipal sector

In the greater Durban area there are about 15 000 municipal workers, the majority belonging to some kind of worker organisation. Indian workers belong to the Durban Integrated Municipal Employees Society (DIMES) with a closed shop agreement with the municipality. The membership of DIMES represents about half the total workforce of which 80% are Indian. DIMES has a tradition of being a mainly non-militant benefit union.

African workers belong to the SA Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU), a COSATU affiliate, with a membership of 2 500. The union says it has had no success in recruiting Indian workers. Organisational, rather than race, divisions exist between the unions.

In the 1992/3 wage negotiations, in a bargaining forum where six unions negotiate with the City Council, the only union to refuse the 14,5% increase was SAMWU. DIMES did not support the subsequent SAMWU protest march to the city hall demanding a living wage. A DIMES organiser attributed this nil support to the lack of progress in the unity talks between the two unions.

Some conclusions around organising Indian workers

Many activists and academics view Indian workers as 'conservative' and difficult to organise. However, the experience of organising Indian workers varies greatly from sector to sector. In addition, Indian workers in many sectors have a long history of trade unionism in organisation like DIMES, GWIU etc. While these unions may have a conservative history, the mere fact that they belong to organisations is a contribution to unity. It is easier to persuade such an organisation about the need for unity than to recruit Indian workers individually.

It seems clear that where shopstewards' committees provide quality, trained, and well-informed leadership they are able to overcome racial divisions – this is especially true because Indian workers had the advantage

of better education under the apartheid system. "The protection and security of being represented by educated and trained shopstewards is certainly attractive," said one CWIU shopsteward.

Another shopsteward also suggested that it would be an advantage to have more Indian worker leadership: "We went to a company to recruit the truck drivers who were mainly Indian workers. What helped to recruit these workers is that we freely discussed specifically Indian concerns. It helps by having Indian workers on the recruiting team and in other leadership positions. It becomes easier to reach out to the Indian worker."

It is also clear that Indian workers are more cautious, and have higher expectations of unions than African workers. They tend to wait for union recognition and evidence of successes before joining. This is one of the problems facing SAMWU in the Durban municipality: "In negotiations we are not in the majority. We cannot significantly influence the outcome of the wage negotiations so we are unable to attract Indian workers."

Indian workers are often less militant than African workers, but this can be overcome. According to a former SACTWU official, "We saw that Indian workers were not used to embarking on industrial action so they were scared. But with education the relation between Indian and African workers thawed, and they took action as a united force." It is also clear that a high quality of service is crucial to keeping these workers in the union.

A CWIU official observed that Indian workers would join the union when they had problems, but "once their problems were solved they would resign". However, "if they are properly organised and educated, and they had made a conscious decision to join the union they become very militant." ☆