

# International support to teachers

## Uplifting and surprising results

In the 1980s both international teachers' organisations in competition with each other worked hard to bring about the unity of South African teachers. **Wouter van der Schaaf** tells the history of this important process and shows how it had unexpected outcomes on a number of levels.

**T**he launch of the South African Democratic Teachers Union (Sadtu) in October 1990 was a landmark in the history of South African teachers, the South African labour movement and the international teachers' movement. The merger between 'established organisations' - the 'blazers' - and 'progressive organisations' - the 'T-shirts' made South Africa a player in the international field of educators.

### TEACHERS: DIVIDED AND UNITED

The creation of Sadtu was foremost an achievement of South African teachers and their organisations. It took many years of negotiation, of seeking common ground and a relentless commitment to unity. In this the international community of teachers in the 1980s played a modest though relevant role.

In the 1980s there were two major international teachers' bodies, the World Confederation of Organisations of the Teaching Profession (WCOTP) and the International Federation of Free Teachers Unions (IFFTU). Each showed their commitment and solidarity with South African educators in many ways.

Worldwide their affiliates protested in front of South African embassies, spoke out against Bantu education,

supported the Salomon Mahlangu Freedom College and called upon members to boycott South African products. These were unprecedented international teachers' support actions to end apartheid.

Both international organisations put South Africa on their agenda, through actions and resolutions. The 1986 WCOTP Assembly of Delegates adopted a resolution condemning apartheid and demanding economic sanctions against South Africa. It condemned the repressive conduct and racist policies of the South African government.

The IFFTU executive board also took a stand in July 1987. It systematically referred to South Africa as 'South Africa/Azania'. The use of the word Azania, nowadays almost forgotten, showed the strong PAC (Pan African Congress) influence in connections between South African teachers' organisations and some of the IFFTU affiliates. The IFFTU board called upon its members to boycott South African products.

The WCOTP had one affiliated organisation in South Africa, the African Teachers Association of South Africa (Atasa). At many events Atasa expressed opposition to the South African education system. In a 1988 statement it noted that it was 'strongly opposed to apartheid in all

of its forms...' and pledged 'to move with urgency towards the promotion of one national and non-racial organisation of teachers.'

Still, the Atasa affiliation caused discomfort within WCOTP circles. A document states: 'Well over 90% of the active members in Atasa are principles' and 'Teachers seem to expect little of Atasa and do not feel that it is a vehicle to question the authority of the DET (Department of Education and Training)'. There was doubt about maintaining Atasa as member. An internal memo an WCOTP affiliate said: 'You could run into some folks who wonder where the hell we've been when they needed us.'

It was a difficult situation for the WCOTP. On the one hand it had the affiliate Atasa, but it did not seek affiliation from the United Teachers Association of South Africa (Utasa) or the Teachers Association of South Africa (Tasa), since 'due to the policy of WCOTP that all of our official relations with South African teachers were to be with the black teachers' union... and had to with the black struggle...'. Nevertheless, contacts existed with the three 'established' organisations with the understanding that the three would walk 'the delicate line between collaboration and rebellion'.



(L-R) Shepherd (Membathisi) Mdladlana, first president of SADTU; Thulas Nxesi, assistant general secretary (later general secretary) and Duncan Hindle, member of NEC and later SADTU president.

Unlike the WCOTP, the IFFTU did not have an affiliate in South Africa. This may have been due to a policy of not accepting unions operating under the apartheid regime. It may also be that the IFFTU did not have the right connections within the country. Most likely it was that IFFTU did not have a strong presence in Southern Africa and lacked representation in the teaching communities of countries like Zimbabwe and Botswana as well.

#### INTERNATIONAL INVOLVEMENT

In the second half of the 1980s, apartheid repression was at its peak. Union leaders went into hiding, schools were closed and the education system was collapsing. Cosatu (Congress of South African Trade Unions), launched in 1985, was gaining strength and influence, but did not have an affiliate in the education sector. Progressive teachers were in need of a strong, national body, connected to the liberation movement, in particular the United Democratic Front (UDF) and the ANC.

The signals from South Africa were well understood internationally, but the lead had to come from within. As with elsewhere, it is an illusion to think that the international community can go beyond support and facilitation. Harold Lewis, Sadtu's first treasurer and previous Tasa leader, gives great importance to the ANC in exile, 'The ANC in exile gave the impetus for unity by encouraging teachers' leaders to meet across the colour line...'

And the internal initiatives came indeed from the political level, the labour movement and teachers' organisations, both 'established' and 'progressive'. All stakeholders in South Africa recognised the pivotal role of education and of those working within this sector and they looked towards the international teachers' movement to facilitate which they did.

The IFFTU organised an international conference in Lusaka, Zambia in March 1987. The theme was 'Education against Apartheid'. The meeting brought together 74 teacher leaders from Western Europe, North America and Africa.

The list of South African participants is of interest. They were mainly of progressive and Pan-Africanist orientation. Progressive Teachers Union (PTU), Black Sash and National Education Union of South Africa (Neusa), Confederation of Trade Unions (Cusa/Azactu) and the South African Congress of Trade Unions (Sactu).

Equally interesting is the list of organisations that were not present: Cosatu and the three 'established' organisations, Atasa, Utasa and Tasa. The PAC was represented but not the ANC.

The meeting report states that 'the tone of the meeting was set as delegates acknowledged that 'teachers cannot be good professionals unless they are good trade unionists.' This was the main orientation of the meeting.

The second one was the emphasis on: 'A new generation of progressive teachers' unions has grown out of the education crisis'

- new leaders who wanted to enhance their profile, and show they were distinct from the three 'established' organisations. In doing so, representatives used strong words, sometimes caricaturing Atasa, Utasa and Tasa.

The meeting ended with a push towards cooperation and 'Closer unity is on the agenda' meant including only progressive organisations. Due to the absence of 'professional bodies', meaning 'very sectarian, representing only the interests of the middle-class teachers', there was no process of building bridges. A PTU representative stated: 'We strongly urge that Atasa, Utasa and Tasa be isolated by the international community'.

This view led to an IFFTU resolution stating, 'IFFTU request all organisations that may have developed relations with South African associations or groupings that perpetuate apartheid through either direct or indirect contacts with the Pretoria regime, to immediately put an end to such relationships.'

The South African participants however stated that 'while progressive teachers' organisations may seem fragmented, they do share a common view of the crisis in South Africa.'

A year later IFFTU's rival WCOTP convened a seminar in Harare from 2 to 8 April 1988. The WCOTP organised the meeting under the joint auspices of the South African Congress of Trade Unions (Sactu) in collaboration with Cosatu. In his report the secretary general of WCOTP, Norman Goble, called it

'only a beginning, though its is a historic beginning.'

Contrary to the IFFTU meeting in 1987 which convened only the 'newly emerged' or 'progressive' organisations, the WCOTP succeeded in bringing to Harare representatives from both the 'established' and the 'progressives'.

In addition, the meeting included political heavyweights like Thabo Mbeki and Jacob Zuma. Cosatu was represented by its office bearer Sydney Mufamadi. And whilst the IFFTU meeting had a large number

divided, departed in the spirit of unity.' An optimistic statement, which did not hide that enormous differences had to be overcome before the creation of one union.

It must be emphasised that it was the political process within South Africa which determined the pace and the direction which led to the launch of Sadtu in 1990 although the international teaching community brought the South Africans to Lusaka, London and Harare. The international community facilitated debates and

professional and labour issues; associations and unions; the relationship to the broader labour movement and the strategy in relation to the apartheid authorities. These and many other issues had to be debated and decided upon.

The examples from teachers' organisations overseas played a role and the international contacts contributed to the discussions and decisions. But in the end it was a South African decision which determined the outcome.



*Sadtu members attending the launch at Orlando Stadium.*



*Meeting hall at Shareworld in Johannesburg at the launch of SADTU in 1990.*

of affiliates from all over Africa, the WCOTP meeting was mainly driven by South Africans.

It was the bringing together of all stakeholders that could lead to concrete unity. Whilst the 1987 IFFTU meeting emphasised the differences between 'established' and 'progressive', dominated by the latter, the 1988 meeting took a more pragmatic approach. Not because the leaders of the teachers' organisations liked each other but because Cosatu and the ANC put pressure on all teachers' organisations to unite, despite differences.

The report states: 'Teacher leaders who came to Harare

meetings but the key decisions were taken within South Africa, by the teachers and their leaders, by unions and associations themselves.

The impact of the Harare meeting was considerable and led to ongoing negotiations between all unions, associations and teachers' organisations.

As Harold Samuel notes in *A history of the search for teacher unity in South Africa*, the Harare Accord led to the establishment of the National Teachers Unity Forum (NTUF). It was within this body that key issues had to be decided upon including the structure of the organisation - federation or unitary; the balance between

## LAUNCH

The launch of Sadtu was at Shareworld in Johannesburg on October 6 to 7, 1990.

The first day was a closed session and the international guests had no role which was a good decision by organisers. There was no time for rituals and solidarity speeches. All efforts had focused on finalising the process that had taken over two years to unite the widest possible section of the South African teaching community. 'Unity' was the goal that was largely attained.

Unfortunately, not all organisations decided to join but still the achievement was tremendous.

On the second day the presence of representatives from national teachers' unions, mainly from Europe and North America, as well as representatives from the two international teachers' bodies, the WCOTP and the IFFTU came to the fore. The All African Teachers Organisation (AATO) also participated. They gave international status to Sadtu.

The launch of Sadtu was the best that could happen to WCOTP and IFFTU. It created the opportunity to seek an alliance with one partner in the new South Africa.

For the WCOTP, Sadtu meant the ending of a sometimes uncomfortable partnership with South African teachers' organisations. For the IFFTU Sadtu gave the opportunity to build an alliance with a large and well established organisation in the new South Africa. The alternative would have been to link up with small organisations dispersed over provinces.

So the creation of Sadtu was a great opportunity for the international community: one organisation with huge political credibility as it had a strong alliance with Cosatu and through the federation to the ANC. The new teachers' union became part of the liberation movement, the best option that any international alliance could hope for.

### PIECES OF PUZZLE FIT

Immediately after the launch, IFFTU and WCOTP representatives met to discuss the new situation. Sadtu was not affiliated to an international organisation and only WCOTP could claim one predecessor of Sadtu – Atasa. Would this make Sadtu automatically a member of WCOTP?

The international representatives concluded that the worst scenario was renewed competition between IFFTU and WCOTP, each trying to gain Sadtu as an affiliate through financial support. Tom Bediako, secretary general of AATO, stressed that it would be unwise to push Sadtu to an affiliation with any international body. This was a recommendation well taken by the Sadtu office bearers at the meeting.

Representatives from both international organisations decided they would join hands, work in unity with Sadtu and build a consortium through which all partners would channel their technical knowledge and financial support.

This meeting was a considerable breakthrough. Congresses of both international organisations had previously decided to open doors to unity and explore ways of creating one international teachers' organisation. But the political process was still fragile and it took the example of Sadtu to prove that cooperation between WCOTP and IFFTU could work.

The creation of Sadtu meant bringing together all forces and resources. In a sense its creation contributed indirectly to the merger of the two internationals. Working together as a 'consortium' in support of Sadtu implied building working relationships and personal contacts. It led to a gradual breakdown of antagonisms and rivalry and to building trust.

The creation of 'The Consortium' was unprecedented in the history of international development cooperation in the teachers' movement. The consortium came out of a realisation that a fragmented approach would be disastrous for the young organisation.

Examples of double funding and competition, favouritism and inefficiency were abundant in the years preceding 1990. IFFTU and WCOTP competed for membership and national unions in 'the North' tried to create the best projects. What became known as 'the Sadtu consortium' was a fundamental breakthrough in the world of teachers' organisations.

The consortium followed the pattern at confederation level for about five years. The national trade union confederations from Sweden, Norway, Finland, the Netherlands, Canada and Denmark combined their efforts to strengthen Cosatu. The momentum, the goal, the organisation and the ambition: all pieces of the puzzle fitted well at the right place and time.

### CONCLUSION

From the start Sadtu had an international orientation with strong links with teachers' unions worldwide. It was a strong example to many teachers-unions by building a solid, respected and progressive organisation.

From 1990 Sadtu played an active role within Education International (EI), the international body of teachers' unions that was formed in 1993 by the merger of WCOTP and IFFTU. In 2004 Sadtu's general secretary, Thulas Nxesi was elected president of EI. This underlined Sadtu's commitment to international teachers' solidarity which played an important role in its creation in 1990. LB

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