

Building a fighting force

Chemical Workers Industrial Union (CWIU) President, Abraham Agulhas, talks to Deanne Collins about the union's campaign for centralised bargaining, the prospects for socialism in South Africa and unity amongst chemical workers.

Labour Bulletin: What are the main issues now facing the CWIU?

Agulhas: The main issue, of course, is the centralised bargaining campaign we are currently involved in. If we do not achieve centralised bargaining we will remain in a weak position. What we have been doing is to mobilise every single organiser, staff member, shopsteward and worker behind the campaign. We have stopped all our negotiations with the bosses at plant level and we are only intervening in areas where workers are, for example, facing retrenchments and serious restructuring.

We have also organised our union's financial resources – not that we have a lot of money. But at least we have made sure that organisers in different branches will be able to go out and campaign. Our structures are weaker because of the violence and the



political issues in the country. But our locals are beginning to revive again.

We have had a couple of meetings with the employers. Just to recall, in 1991 we had a strike in the petroleum sector. Three companies – BP, Caltex and Total – came out to demand centralised bargaining. There was an 11 day strike countrywide. Subsequent to that, we engaged employers every year on this issue. We want an industrial council for the Chemical Industry which will be a

strategy body. That is for everybody including SACWU (South African Chemical Workers Union), our sister union in NACTU. What we are telling employers is that we want a bargaining forum with all chemical employers. Of course in any bargaining forum we will have different sectors. We have identified a couple – glass, plastic, petroleum and consumer. These are the main sectors we are looking at.

We want an agreement in principle first because we do not want to negotiate details and end up settling with different sectors and doing different agreements. I think the employers are trying to buy time. They are saying that they are not against centralised bargaining as such, but they want to have sectors. I am sure they are going to put forward a lot of different sectors. We are using the Industrial Classification System, which is the international classification for chemical companies.

Labour Bulletin: *It has been suggested that labour minister, Tito Mboveni, has been helping the chemical workers, because he called employers to meet him where he told them they had to accept centralised bargaining. Is this your perception?*

Agulhas: I won't say assisting us as such. I think the minister played a role in facilitating the meeting and also in getting more employers to the meeting.

I think the minister's obligation is to support workers, whatever the newspapers or the bosses want to say. Centralised bargaining is in the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP). I do not know how people expect the RDP to deliver unless there is a commitment to training and skilling workers.

Labour Bulletin: *Will there be a national strike in support of centralised bargaining in the chemical industry?*

Agulhas: We are planning for a national strike. Previously the tendency has been to occupy the factories and stop production and things like that. This time we discussed in our locals that we have to be strategic and also target particular points.

For me, it is a question of power. The employers still want to live in the old situation – they have been protected quite a lot. They will not give up their power easily. Then there is also the double talk: the employers say they want workers to co-operate, but what they want is of course a form of co-optation. I think they want to delay the process. They keep information to themselves so as to control people. They make changes which pretend to be affirmative action but in real terms it is only cosmetic. Most of our companies in this country make huge profits. Many of our companies are multinationals. They are returning to this country precisely because things stay so much the same.

Labour Bulletin: *In your sector you have workers who are earning around R11 an hour and then you have workers earning much less than that. How do you reconcile those things? And if you are going to negotiate wages on a central level does that mean you will be setting one minimum or are you going to negotiate a minimum wage for each sector?*

Agulhas: We obviously want to uplift the standard of living of workers in our industry. I am not saying that we need to neglect higher earners, but the focus is to uplift everybody. We have some places, especially in the (former) bantustans, where people are still earning R40 a week. We cannot have a situation where we have a so-called democratic South Africa and then people are still earning that. We are fighting for a minimum wage of R1 600 for all workers irrespective of which sector they belong to. We are also fighting for a 20% increase in the industry.

In NEDLAC we are talking about disclosure of information. We will be able to see exactly how much companies can afford in this industry. Hopefully we will also give workers other rights to decide on investment and technology and things like that which I think will capture the higher paid

Labour Bulletin: *There is a tendency these days to see any worker who has a job as a member of an elite, particularly those who work in the better-paid sectors. Does CWTU see itself as acting in solidarity with the so-called marginalised workers, such as domestic and farm-workers? How can your union take up the struggle of the unemployed?*

Agulhas: I think it must be possible to take up the struggle of the unemployed and the disadvantaged groups in our society. I personally maintain that when we discuss at NEDLAC we shouldn't discuss only wages and the conditions of workers, we have to put in things like job creation and housing. In NEDLAC we do have an alliance with community organisations

I do not think it is a matter of a conflict of interest between organised workers and unorganised workers. It is how best we bring people together. It could be a very exciting project.

Labour Bulletin: *You, and the CWTU are portrayed in COSATU as presenting a left position, which is at odds with mainstream COSATU thinking. Is this true, and could you explain how you see a socialist project unfolding in South Africa?*

Agulhas: Yes, I would classify us as a left force in COSATU. We in Chemical have historically had a lot of principled fights within the federation, putting very principled positions around worker issues. I think we have played a very good role up to now and have been proven right on many occasions.

I personally believe that we must fight for



socialism in South Africa and internationally. I believe the labour movement can play a very important role in this struggle. The political consciousness of workers in South Africa is on a level where people could easily grasp socialism. I think it is leadership which is lacking in its commitment. Even now workers are ready to fight but you hear the leadership saying "No, we are not ready". You can see on the ground that workers are frustrated that change in this country is not happening. People voted last year and they do not see any immediate changes in the economic situation. Socialism is a viable project in South Africa but the problem is that everybody does not share that idea within COSATU. A lot of people think that you still have to give the Government of National Unity a chance – wait until 1999. We operate in a capitalist environment and whether the Government of National Unity is there or not there is still a capitalist system.

We have to become a fighting force in the current democratic environment. We have to go into schools and make sure the history of the working class is being taught. As workers

we have to fight and make sure that we control the media. We must provide leadership at this critical time.

I have noticed a shift in COSATU away from our old traditional ways. We have to go back to our old style of organising and make sure that we have a broad socialist movement. The civics, the students and so on must be behind the labour programme. Right now, if we in the petroleum sector demand money we are told the petrol price will go up, and as a result the society will suffer. An unnecessary conflictual situation is being built up between workers and the community.

Labour Bulletin: *You talked earlier about using institutions like NEDLAC to make gains for your members. Do you see a contradiction between moving towards the kind of model that NEDLAC represents and the socialist project?*

Agulhas: Well obviously everybody is talking about co-operating with each other at this stage and the whole world is trying to promote tripartism. I do not have too much of a problem with tripartism, but it depends on the agenda of labour and what you want to achieve through tripartism. A lot of people preach reconciliation and things like that. I have to ask myself, what do we reconcile with here in South Africa? Can a person who owns nothing, who has no house and no job reconcile? Can I reconcile with a person living in the street? Will tripartite structures be able to address these kinds of differences?

Labour should set an agenda which begins to challenge capital and the state to make sure that the agenda of the broader working class will be achieved. As a labour movement we have made lots of gains. We have to make sure that we keep those gains and improve upon them so that we begin to work towards a situation where the power of workers could be the same as the power of the state. It will be very difficult but if I look at the ground I

can clearly see that people are ready to fight.

The LRA issue is a good example here. COSATU must agitate for a general strike. Let's test the power of workers and see whether people are ready for this. From the general strike we can make our assessment again to see which way and what is the next step. We did that during the apartheid years. Why can't we do it now?

Real change will not take place unless we have a workers' party in South Africa. The parties that claim to be the workers' party do not represent the whole country. You can't be in parliament and represent workers. COSATU will have to discuss the issue of a workers' party much more thoroughly. NUMSA (the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa) already supports this idea. I also support it. My union does not support it at this point in time, but we have to break the alliance. Labour must have an independent agenda in the democratic South Africa. I do not think we will be able to achieve socialism as workers on our own: we have to form a workers' party.

Labour Bulletin: *How would unions relate to a workers' party?*

Agulhas: I do not think we should encourage unions as a block to affiliate to a political party because unions are independent from any political party. Instead, we should encourage workers to join the party.

Labour Bulletin: *In terms of a socialist project, what are your views on things like industry restructuring and work organisation? It seems that one of the key issues is the question of worker control? What are your strategies to get to worker control?*

Agulhas: The union will have to be involved directly in restructuring because this affects the interests of workers. It is not for employers to determine where the benefits of restructuring should go: workers must also decide on that.



Before any company wants to restructure, we must say, "give us your financial statement". Then we see the economic viability of the company before restructuring. Then after restructuring the company must invest upfront. We are arguing that there shouldn't be any job losses and there must be an investment somewhere to make sure that workers can be looked after in the company.

There is going to be an ongoing struggle for getting improvements for workers. At this stage companies, in my experience, usually keep all the information. I think this is going to continue until we have legislation in place.

Labour Bulletin: *There has been much talk of mergers within COSATU. Some support the formation of 'super-unions'. What is Chemical's position on these issues?*

Agulhas: I do not know which way we are going to go. In our particular case our first objective is unity with SACWU. We also have resolutions which direct us towards an arrangement with PPWAWU (Paper, Printing, Wood & Allied Workers Union). I think it is

important at this point in time that if we are to achieve workers' rights we have to negotiate with organisations in particular sectors. So I would encourage that other unions come together.

Labour Bulletin: *Around the question of the centre, should one be building the federation? At the last COSATU Congress the question was raised of the federation taking over some functions, for example, there should be co-ordination and determination of wage negotiations from the centre. What are your views on this?*

Agulhas: I think that it is important to move towards federation bargaining. I do not have a problem with COSATU bargaining across different industries. What we have to debate is how you have your centralised bargaining at that level and at the same time make sure that democratic discussion would take place on the shopfloor. I think it would be good if COSATU could move in that direction, though obviously it is a dream at this stage because most unions don't even have centralised bargaining in their industries.

Labour Bulletin: *What issues could be negotiated in this way?*

Agulhas: If we are talking of labour standards, the federations are very important. I do not think the government should legislate standards, because what is happening is that legislation stays the same for ten years. The federation would probably not be able to negotiate standards every year, but could do it every two or three years. In this way it could consistently improve standards in the country. If we talk about issues of industrial democracy or industrial restructuring, some unions are strong, others are weak. There are different developments in the different sectors. At the moment, everybody is talking about economic growth. Federations need to intervene to make sure that all sectors are brought together so that we can achieve our objectives.

Labour Bulletin: *Are you satisfied that the labour representatives at NEDLAC reflect the views of workers on the ground? How can workers make input into these negotiations?*

Agulhas: I am not entirely happy with the process. We as Chemical are part of COSATU, so we are part of the NEDLAC process. It brings into focus a question of democracy within the labour movement. This issue needs to be discussed because a lot of our negotiations will be centralised. We must be honest: workers do not always understand the details of what is being discussed at top level.

As Chemical we consistently argue that negotiating teams should consist of a majority of workers. Also, if we want effective negotiation we have to change the form and composition of the negotiating teams. I think we should have at least 500 or 600 workers and we go there and we report back and we go back to the negotiations.

I think it is important that we have that kind of constituency where we can report on a weekly basis. So NEDLAC will have to be transformed to get that kind of democratic emphasis. We need structures where workers can give their inputs. Communication needs to be sorted out, the media around the negotiations is not good enough.

Labour Bulletin: *If Chemical goes the route of centralised bargaining you are going to face the same kinds of problems.*

Agulhas: It is going to be a challenge for Chemical to see how we can keep that involvement while conducting top level negotiations. We do not have the solution. What we have at this stage is a commitment from the staff and organisers. People have been used to a very long tradition of democratic discussions. I just hope that this commitment will take us forward in the centralised bargaining forum.

Labour Bulletin: *There has been much talk about the organisational crisis within COSATU and its affiliates. Does Chemical suffer from this?*

Agulhas: Obviously yes, we suffered from that, but I do not think it is to the same extent as other affiliates. Violence has affected our structures. A lot of people were part of political negotiations. We are trying to introduce issues that will rebuild our structures. In general, structures are functioning countrywide and activities happen on a national level. Everyone must report in detail to all levels. If we maintain this situation it will take us through. As I said earlier, the centralised bargaining campaign is just in time to revive our structures.

Labour Bulletin: *Are the CWIU and SACWU any closer to forming a single union?*

Agulhas: Unity of workers is a very important thing for us. We have been speaking to SACWU for years. We are also working with them on the centralised bargaining issue. For me personally it will be the happiest day in my life when we have the two chemical unions together. We would like to see a situation when we come together with SACWU.

Labour Bulletin: *A final comment?*

Agulhas: A lot of people think that now we are in a democratic South Africa things will come right. At the same time people are frustrated because they want change right now. I support the call for change. There is enough money in this country. We have to take some of the banks and nationalise them and make sure that there is money for houses. People must organise themselves, go back and join the trade union movement, join organisations to make sure that when we transform society it's a mass-based transformation. We mustn't wait and see and give the government a chance. We are not there to give the government a chance. ★