

Organising casual workers

Present at the interview were: Vuyo Dikana, national president, Ivan Berries, general secretary, Sampo Hankan, national organiser, Yvonne Masabalala, member of YCW and flexi-timer at Checkers, Mayfair, and Peter Machine, member of YCW and permanent worker at Coca Cola

Labour Bulletin: Could you give me some background to the casualisation campaign? Why did you decide to run with this campaign?

Ivan: YCW saw the casualisation campaign as a way to build our identity as a worker movement. Former YCW members now working for the labour movement wanted to take up the campaign. In 1995 the Australian YCW also launched a successful casualisation campaign which received an award from the UN. It was later pointed out that this campaign was an important one for the YCW to take up internationally.

We decided to start by conducting broad research. We saw permanent workers with these huge benefits and workers within the same company with nothing. There was a huge difference between the two. We met with casuals and discussed the problems they face at work. This is when we saw that we could launch this campaign nationally.

In 1997 we decided to take up the

The Young Christian Workers (YCW) have launched a campaign that focuses on improving the plight of casual workers. Rob Rees took the opportunity to find out about the campaign and talked to YCW members about how they see their role in relation to these workers.

campaign. We held three workshops at the national office level that focused on the Basic Conditions of Employment Act. This Act was not enforced at the time. We had workers from Checkers and Trans Natal, a company where one of our former YCW members worked, attending. We began with them to see how we could pursue the campaign. This is how it all started.

Labour Bulletin: What were the next steps towards building your campaign?

Ivan: Forming YCW groups was the next step. The first group we started was at Checkers. Casuals met here and analysed the problems they were facing at work. In all the provinces where the YCW exists we decided to set up these groups of casuals.

We had to find a larger platform for them to voice out their problems though, like a national campaign and a national congress.

The build-up to the national campaign started in the groups we had formed. These groups planned regional events and regional congresses around the casualisation campaign. The demands of the casual workers were actually drafted into a regional manifesto of demands.

The next step was to have a national congress. This took a lot of preparation and commitment from experienced YCW leadership and from the casual workers. A committee made up of representatives from the casual workers' groupings came together and drafted a national manifesto for casual workers. This was done by people involved in and affected by the campaign. This Manifesto was adopted during the national congress on 9 August.

Labour Bulletin: What are some of the demands that appear in the Manifesto?

Yvonne: Some of the demands relate to the working hours. Casuals are still working long hours and there is little concern for their safety. Casuals also need more money. Management doesn't even consider what these workers produce. All these demands need to be implemented and improved upon. We are trying to mobilise many more workers through these demands.

We have also formulated demands which are directed to the labour movement. We are asking that those workers organised by the labour movement should also consider that casual workers are workers. Casual workers produce the same products as permanent workers but permanent workers have more privileges than casual workers. Casual workers should be given a platform within the trade unions. The trade unions should have a desk where

casual workers can voice out their demands.

Labour Bulletin: Yvonne, as a casual worker, what impact has the campaign had on you?

Yvonne: This campaign means a lot to me. Before I joined the YCW we were not united at work. I joined the worker's movement in 1997 and that is when I became strong. Before this there was a lot of harassment from the management and supervisors. Some of these things have since stopped. We also joined SACCAWU and are paying R10 subs each month. This has helped because when any of us has a problem the supervisor would say 'I've got a problem with you' and dismiss you without a hearing. Now the shopstewards represent us. It was difficult at the beginning for workers to join the union. Casual workers had worked for many years and the union did not represent them. But since shopstewards have started representing casuals that are about to be dismissed, this has changed.

Labour Bulletin: What is your experience in relating to the trade unions?

Jean: Prior to the national congress for casual workers, the relationship with the trade unions was a very informal one. The trade unions were ignorant about our casualisation campaign. After the congress some unions started to recognise the role we played and we started to build up links.

At a regional level in the Free State a very strong relationship was built with FAWU. Some casual workers were working in the bakery and joined the union after the national congress. The union also recognised these casual workers as workers.



Casual workers produce the same products as permanent workers

The unions need to recognise the role that we play. The role of the YCW is not to take the job of the unions by representing workers and so on. Instead, the YCW is to present an analysis of the situation relating to casual work for people to understand and to inform and educate casual workers. We also need to see how casual workers can participate in the labour movement.

We realise that we have to get a good relationship with the unions. So, when we tackled this issue of casualisation at work, we took a combined approach with the labour movement. This gives a bigger voice to the campaign. That's where the confusion about the role of the YCW, and the role of the unions was solved.

Labour Bulletin: Do you have any concrete examples of how things for casual workers have improved and how the attitude of the unions has changed?

Sampo: I worked in the Free State as an extension worker last year and organised casual workers. Eight people at Biscuit King in Kroonstad joined the YCW.

They were having many problems at work with their salaries, payslips, overtime, no access to toilets etc. These workers didn't join any trade union so YCW had to introduce them to the trade unions. We introduced them to FAWU but it was difficult for them at first to take casuals into the trade union.

The union started out by thinking that YCW wanted to take their jobs. I think it took about a year to get the trade union to understand what the YCW is and what our aims and objectives are. We explained that we teach casual workers about their rights, but a national trade union organiser will have to take the responsibility for distributing joining forms and getting workers to join the trade union. Today in

Biscuit King, most of the workers have now joined the union.

Labour Bulletin: What are your plans for the year?

Jean: We must increase the number of casual workers we have organised. We will need all the manpower we have to do this. One target that we have this year, which has not been broadly discussed yet, is farmworkers. How are we going to reach out to these farmworkers?

We also need to broaden this casual workers campaign. For instance, there are flexi workers and contract workers. We need to specify each and every category of casual work and give support to all categories. We need to define how we're going to challenge these different types of employment.

At a regional and national level we need to put in place a concrete monitoring committee consisting of casual workers and YCW leadership which looks closely at the casualisation campaign. Education must also be given to casual workers on their rights as far as the Basic Conditions of Employment Act and the Employment Equity Bill are concerned.

The labour movement also needs to find out more about the role of the YCW. This, we expect, will mostly happen at a regional level because this is where the actual actions and challenges are taking place.



'Casual work kills the labour movement.'

Labour Bulletin: How many casual groups have you got at present?

Jean: Currently, there are about 10 to 15 casual worker groups. The groups have between four and ten workers in each. In Cape Town there are two existing groups; in Port Elizabeth, three; in the Free State, four; and in Gauteng, three. In Mpumalanga we have very limited participation because the campaign has not been effective nor properly launched.

We want to develop this campaign so that they represent casual workers within the South African national movement.

Labour Bulletin: *How do you become a member of YCW? How can you take part in the casualisation campaign?*

Ivan: Generally, people view the YCW as a Christian movement. Because the YCW is very ecumenical, any person can belong. It's open to any worker - any person who feels they want to bring about change in their lives. We have a common goal to bring people together who have an interest in changing their situation. The YCW is an open community. That's the kind of message that we want to bring to the working class at large.

Labour Bulletin: *What is your thinking regarding the struggle for permanent jobs?*

Ivan: This is the starting point of our campaign. Casual work kills everything that we've been struggling for all these years. The struggle to ensure that casual workers get permanent employment is therefore a prominent demand. We're not trying to say that we're going to achieve this easily though because each day more and more work is being casualised. This is a very big challenge that we're faced with.

Labour Bulletin: *Have you had any success in achieving an end to casualisation?*

Sampo: There have been changes. The example I can give is the casual workers in the biscuit factory in the Free State. They were casual workers for three years but are now permanent workers because of the campaign that was launched. They attended our national congress with their trade union organisers. Now today they are permanent workers.

Yvonne: Even in Checkers there are some changes. I was a casual before for five

years. Now I am a flexi-timer. Flexi-timers work half the hours of a permanent worker - about 100 hours per month.

Peter: At Coca Cola, the casual workers joined the union last year. Before that they knew nothing about unions. Now they have a union and they are trying to push forward their demands.

Labour Bulletin: *South African trade unions have been the most powerful and militant in the world, so how do we explain that their doors are not opening to the poorest of the poor?*

Vuyo: Labour movements are trying to fight for things that relate to the international economy. This makes it very difficult for grassroots people to participate in the labour movement. People normally are able to speak out about these issues at workplaces. Now there's not enough time for that.

Ivan: Casual work kills the labour movement. The unions are scared of organising casual workers because they're not sure if these workers will be there next month. If you represent 90% of casual workers, you're not sure how long this will last especially within this new economic transformation process. I do not blame the labour movement totally because it's very difficult to organise this specific sector. I do blame them for actually not recognising that casual workers exist though.

The union almost wholly depends on its membership to pay the bills and provide the necessary resources. Having casual workers organised in the labour movement with no fixed work or salaries is therefore difficult. This is the one reason why the labour movement should open its doors to casuals, but the unions are afraid



Some of the YCW's demands relate to working hours.

to because of the problem they face with money, stability and employment.

It is getting more and more difficult for the labour movement though because the mind set of people has totally changed. Even permanent workers these days ask themselves why it is important to join the union movement. Workers don't see a need to join the labour movement because they believe they have all these benefits and privileges. This creates a very bad impression to casuals because they see that permanent workers are not interested in the union.

Labour Bulletin: Any concluding remarks?

Ivan: I think we should just hope that the situation of casual work will somehow

change although this does not seem really achievable. We would like to follow what was created by the Australian YCW casual workers' campaign. The award they got from the United Nations Developmental Department was a big achievement.

I think that for us the struggle around casuals and casualisation will be a struggle that goes on forever. This is something for the YCW to really pursue, but not just for the YCW alone because this is a very big problem, bigger than the YCW itself. The unions need to come together, all the labour movements need to come together. They need to address the issue of casuals collectively because I think we will have a much bigger voice and impact than if we act individually. ★

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