

Many streams, one union

NUMSA in the 21st century

Bulletin: Tell us about the history and character of NUMSA.

Nondwangu: NUMSA came about as the result of a merger process of seven unions in 1987. These unions included the Metal & Allied Workers Union (MAWU) and the Motor Industries Combined Workers Union (MICWU). These unions came together to give expression to COSATU's resolution of 'one union, one industry'. At its formation, NUMSA had 220 000 members in four sectors:

- tyre and rubber;
- auto, which consist of car manufacturers;
- motor, which includes small garages and components; and
- engineering.

NUMSA consisted of different streams and ideological schools of thought and organisational experiences. On the one extreme, you had the so-called workerist tendency, a configuration of different thoughts that believed in shopfloor organisation. The other extreme was the Congress Alliance, which represented the majority and won many political debates in the union.

Bulletin: What does NUMSA look like today?

Nondwangu: The different streams still exist in NUMSA. At our congress in August

Etienne Vlok interviews

Silumko Nondwangu, NUMSA general secretary.

2000, one position said we should break away from the Tripartite Alliance, while the other suggested we retain the Alliance and work for its transformation. The existence of these streams ensures vigorous political debate.

Since 1994, our membership has declined due to retrenchments and closures of companies. The engineering sector has seen a huge decline and this has affected the union. Currently, we stand between 173 000 and 200 000 members.

Bulletin: The last few months have seen numerous strikes by NUMSA. Can you give us a summary of what has happened?

Nondwangu: Our collective bargaining strategy was crafted very carefully at our national bargaining conference (NBC) in April. Our strategy took into account the four sectors that we organise. We did an analysis of the long-term agreements and its achievements in the last three years.

For example, the engineering sector had massive job losses and therefore, the bargaining strategy in that sector would be to tighten provisions relating to

retrenchments and work security. We had to protect the conditions of employment, but also retain the existing jobs and build an environment to create more jobs in that sector. We settled in this sector at a 9% increase. We have also started a process of reducing the working week from 45 to 40 hours. In that way, we intend creating jobs as well in the sector.

In the past, the auto industry set the pace in the union with regards to militant struggle. For a number of reasons it has not been doing that recently. We decided it should be leading the collective bargaining this time. We would use the struggle in the auto sector to ensure benefits arise for the other sectors. The theme of the NBC was 'Bargaining, unity and solidarity in the 21st century'. We decided to use the sectors where we are strong to ensure we gain where we are weak.

Our collective bargaining strategy meant that our weakest sector, the motor sector, managed to win an increase of 8%, which is way above inflation.

Bulletin: *The auto strike received a lot of publicity. Was it a victory for you?*

Nondwangu: Certainly, it was a major victory for many reasons. The employers underestimated our ability to pull out a strike in that industry, particularly with the problems at Volkswagen. Also, the past three years have seen plant agreements negotiated. Therefore, the employers thought they had a good relationship with their employees and thus these employees would not take them head-on in a strike. The employers had an arrogant attitude during the negotiations. They did not think the strike would even last one week. The strike benefited us as it consolidated the union.

The majority of the workers went out. Even members of other trade unions joined the strike. For the first time in history, BMW

workers went on strike on their own. In the past, they had to be pulled out of the plant. The strike indicated to the employers in the auto industry that NUMSA is a force to be reckoned with.

Bulletin: *Your initial demand in the auto sector was 15%. Why was it that high?*

Nondwangu: It was high because over the last three years, workers' wages have been declining because of the price increases in food and petrol. At the NBC, we decided not to settle for anything less than 10%. If, however, we would have to settle at less than 10%, the NEC would have to take that decision. We were serious about collective bargaining this year to ensure that in the next three years our members have bread to put on the table and better living standards.

Workers in Japan, Germany and the United States (US) earn ten times more than South African workers doing the same job with the same skills.

Take the employers. We did an analysis of what the chief executive officer (CEO) of Daimler-Chrysler, Christopher Köpke, earns. He earns about R4 500 per hour, yet the president of NUMSA, Mthuthuzeli Tom, earns less than R20 an hour. In South Africa, unlike in the US, CEOs are not compelled to declare their salaries. That is something we are pursuing beyond the bargaining process. We have a country where the rich continue to be stinking rich and the poor continue to be poor. We should not live under any illusion that political democracy has translated into economic emancipation for the working class. That struggle will continue for another decade.

Bulletin: *Car manufacturers have received export contracts. Are the workers reaping the rewards of these contracts?*



NUMSA's general secretary, Silumko Nondwangu.

Nondwangu: Workers have ensured that the automobile manufacturers are integrated into their global networks. Yet, the workers are not receiving any benefits. Had it not been for the sacrifices made by our members in Daimler-Chrysler, BMW and Volkswagen in the last three years, those companies would not have received export contracts from their mother plants. Therefore, NUMSA is saying, the workers must benefit due to the sacrifices taken in the last three years.

Bulletin: According to the agreement, the wage increase is 9% backdated with an improvement factor of 1% for the second and third years. What does that mean?

Nondwangu: It means that the increase for year one (2001/2002) will be 9%. In years two and three, the increase will be CPIX (inflation excluding home loans) plus 1%. This will cushion the effect of food and petrol price increases, hence it is called the improvement factor.

Bulletin: If the Reserve Bank keeps inflation between 3 and 6%, it would mean an increase of between 4 and 7% next year. Is that not too low?

Nondwangu: Workers will be happy with that. I don't think Tito [Mboweni, governor of the Reserve Bank] will be able to stick to his inflationary targets in the next two or three years. If inflation is 5% in the second year, our members will be entitled to a 6% increase.

Bulletin: The car manufacturers threatened to pull out of the country, especially Köpke from Daimler-Chrysler, and Alec Erwin, Minister of Trade and Industry, said 'Export orders wait for no union'. What do you think of these threats?

Nondwangu: We took the threats, especially from Köpke, very seriously. But we are clear in our minds that, as NUMSA, we are not going to be blackmailed.

Because of Köpke's threat, we mobilised international support. He referred to relocating production to Germany. We immediately contacted our colleagues from IG-Metall in Germany. They sent us correspondence saying that if relocation took place they would not take on any South African production. We mobilised international support. We are not going to be blackmailed regarding export orders that could be lost. Employers should rather deal with the real issues.

Regarding the minister, we did not take Alec seriously.

Bulletin: How did the autoworkers, under the current economic conditions, manage to strike for three weeks?

Nondwangu: We had planned the strike. Workers knew that we were anticipating the strike. In one of the interviews, an employee from Daimler-Chrysler said 'I prepared my family, including myself'.

Workers knew that the stubbornness of the employers would lead to a strike and budgeted for it. We negotiated for two months with employers, giving feedback to members and saying to them how inflexible the employers were being. The major increases to some extent makes up for the three weeks' wages the workers lost. It was worth the sacrifice.

Bulletin: There seems to be increased cooperation between yourself and MWU-Solidarity, especially in Eskom and Highveld Steel. Is a class-consciousness developing?

Nondwangu: Not necessarily. They cannot afford not to participate or show some solidarity when progressive unions wage struggles. They would wipe themselves out. The character of a strong trade union in our country is a progressive union, not a

sweetheart union.

I think there is an element of opportunism on their part. In Eskom, we applied together for a strike, but they did not participate fully in the strike. Some of their members took unpaid leave and others took paid leave. What confronts them is that they see a more progressive trade union such as NUMSA or NUM striking, yet they are not part of those strikes. They may lose membership. They do not have a tradition of militant trade unionism. Therefore, you see them participating in strike action but on the second or third day of the strike, they go back.

I think they are under pressure from their own membership. Pressure that says 'You have got NUMSA, NUM and COSATU unions that are very strong and militant, and winning rights for their membership. What are you doing for us?'

The agreement in the auto sector has an interesting dimension. For the first time, we are able to organise salaried employees in the sector. That is where MWU-Solidarity's constituency is. Very soon, we will organise salaried employees and kick them out of the national bargaining forum process. Gone are the days that you organise based on skin colour. Members are concerned about bread-and-butter issues. They are concerned about the extent to which a trade union can struggle for their rights. MWU-Solidarity is not that kind of trade union. It is not prepared to transform itself to become progressive. It wants to ride on the backs of NUMSA and NUM and we are looking at that very, very carefully.

Bulletin: Do the members of NUMSA still believe in the Alliance?

Nondwangu: I think they do. The Alliance is not under question. Those same workers who went out in the anti-privatisation strike are also ANC members. I lead the



NUMSA decided that the auto sector should lead the collective bargaining.

COSATU march in Durban and I remain a committed ANC member. But there are differences in the Alliance. It is in the interest of working people and the working class in general to ensure that the ANC is tilted towards a left-wing leaning position.

Bulletin: *What does the leadership of NUMSA think about the Alliance?*

Nondwangu: We are guided by the resolutions of our membership. At the last national congress, membership clearly said it is in the interest of the working class to ensure we actively participate in ANC activities. The ANC remains the revolutionary Alliance partner and the leading partner in the context of the national democratic revolution. However, we should ensure that we jealously guard the interests of the working class in the ANC. That resolution will guide us for the next three years until the next NUMSA congress.

Bulletin: *When will members feel they*

have given the ANC enough of a chance and that it is not acting in the interests of the working class?

Nondwangu: I think it will be when there is a complete shift to the right by the ANC. Remember the ANC is a configuration, a multi-class formation with right-wing and left-wing thinkers. It remains a contested terrain of different class interests. We are contesting the character and soul of the ANC to ensure it remains true to the aspirations of the working class in particular and the community in general. Should the right wing win the ANC, we may have to review our positions.

Bulletin: *Financially, how healthy is NUMSA?*

Nondwangu: We are not very strong financially. The decline in membership has seriously affected our financial position. But we are not in the red.

We decided at the congress last year to undergo a process of organisational renewal. Remember the character of trade

unions post-1994 has changed completely. You can't remain bloated of staff as we do currently. Issues are much more complex and if you reposition yourself, you have to look at internal organisational, structures, administration and finances.

Bulletin: What are the major problems facing NUMSA members?

Nondwangi: The major problems are retrenchments, job security, workplace restructuring and stress-related injuries at work. Trade unions will have to ensure that in as much as we have obtained political democracy, we have to ensure we instil that political democracy in the workplace. That is the struggle.

Bulletin: Are you winning that struggle?

Nondwangi: It is very difficult. I always use the following argument: 24 hours a day, I operate in a capitalist environment. The house I live in, the bed I bought, the food I eat, and the car I drive are manufactured in a capitalist environment. Trade unions operate in a capitalist environment and contest capitalism with progressive ideas that view society differently. It is a difficult struggle.

Bulletin: What are some of the campaigns that NUMSA will run to make sure you win these struggles?

Nondwangi: The core business of a trade union is collective bargaining. Yet, education is also vital. Education of our members and training of our shopstewards are the pillars. We educate them about different values – values that would characterise a different society from the society in which we live. It could be a socialist society. Education is the key to success for any trade union.

Bulletin: Are you happy with the position of women in NUMSA?

Nondwangi: No, not very happy. NUMSA does not believe in the quota system in every structure. The development of women must be organic. That is how many people in the trade union developed, such as Angie Moeng, one of our presidents. She started in the factory, went to the local, became part of the region, and participated in women's structures and the community. I am not very happy with developments but we are trying our best to ensure there is a lot more gender representivity in everything we do. One of the responsibilities of our national gender coordinator is to ensure adequate representation of women in all facets of the organisation.

Bulletin: If you are unhappy with the current system, would the quota system not solve the problem?

Nondwangi: If you look at trade unions that have taken that route, it has not taken them anywhere. You need qualitative development. The quota system means replacing someone in the executive. What is more important is what that person does at that level. If you are taken into that position without a process of development, it means absolutely nothing. Organic development is a much longer process but at the end of the day, it is sustainable.

Bulletin: What message do you have for members?

Nondwangi: Members have to understand that NUMSA belongs to them. It is their responsibility to ensure they are part of the process of building a strong and revolutionary trade union. Each member must become an organiser and each member must become an educator. ★