

Money, not mealie meal

Bulletin: When and why was the NUF formed?

Mobanoë: During the apartheid era farmworkers were highly oppressed. They did not have any representation, their wages and working conditions were bad and no wage determination existed. Farmworkers were not even classified as employees. We felt that they needed a mouthpiece and so in February 1988 the NUF was formed.

Bulletin: Where do you organise farmworkers?

Mobanoë: We organise in farming as a whole: horticulture, flowers, forestry, animals and vegetables. We organise nationally because we don't want to leave out any workers. In some areas agriculture is highly concentrated, for example Tzaneen and Nelspruit. Yet workers in other areas experience the same oppression as the highly concentrated areas.

Bulletin: How do you organise farmworkers given the circumstances in the sector such as seasonal workers?

Mobanoë: We have a head office in Johannesburg and regional offices that are coordinated by NACTU. We also have field officers hosted in NACTU offices. Where

Rugaya Rees speaks to Zacharia Mobanoë, assistant general secretary of the National Union of Farmworkers (NUF).

NACTU doesn't have an office we deploy an organiser to operate from home. At the same time people from the head office travel to areas such as Hekpoort, Brits and so forth. Being as small as we are, we have to cover a lot of space.

The industry has a lot of casual workers but those casuals are not our members. The farm owners say the casual workers are their people and they don't want us to organise them. But the union is insisting that those workers be regarded as permanent seasonal workers. Then they can become our members and enjoy the same benefits as our other members. It is still a battle to make these workers aware that they are also part and parcel of the whole family because they do not regard themselves as workers.

One of the farmers' strategies to weaken the trade union is to have many seasonal workers. It is a means for them to pay lower wages as they ensure the permanent workers do not rise and demand higher wages. The permanent

workers are afraid, because they are told that the seasonal workers are looking for a job. The permanent workers regard the seasonal workers as a threat. The farm owners have created a rift.

Bulletin: Does the NUF experience difficulties with farm owners?

Mobanoé: Farm owners don't always know what is happening. They are confused people. It is the labour consultants who cause the farm owners to be confused and difficult. A farm owner might want to cooperate, but once he has been to the consultants then things change. So in some cases we have told the farm owner to chase away the consultant so that we can reach a settlement. We make them aware that the consultant is only there to collect a cheque.

Bulletin: How do the labour consultants operate?

Mobanoé: We have a lot of problems with labour consultants. As I have indicated they are willing to disorganise labour in this country. They find farm owners who are ignorant in terms of the labour laws and then offer to represent these owners. So now labour consultants are representing all the farm owners. The consultants make the union's job very difficult. They stall basic things like the farmer recognising the union or giving the workers basic rights. Labour consultants make our task very difficult.

Bulletin: What are your bargaining arrangements?

Mobanoé: On every farm where we operate and have signed a recognition agreement, we are formulating a team of shopstewards to bargain with the

employer. This is especially the case for the big farms that operate in more than one province. Here we bind teams of shopstewards together and appoint them to decide what percentage to look for and what issues to raise.

We have gained a number of things for our members in bargaining such as an increase in their wages. On some farms where we negotiated with farmers to subsidise creches, the farmers have agreed to do this. We have managed to make farmers aware that we are their partners, not their rivals.

The workers are hopeful that the union will change the conditions on the farms for them. Sometimes the conditions are disgusting. I used to tell people when they talk about Burundi that they will find similar places right here in Boksburg and Germiston. One does not need to look far. We have a Burundi situation right on our doorsteps. We must remember that before we give blankets and charity to victims of other countries.

Bulletin: What is the NUF's opinion on sectoral determination?

Mobanoé: We support it. It is difficult for a union to negotiate in farming because employers pay whatever comes into their head. There is no uniformity. Sectorial determination will provide a basis with which to start the negotiations.

Furthermore, a number of farm owners hide behind government. The farm owners say that they pay low wages, because the government is not assisting them. We hear a lot of stories from farmers trying to justify why they pay low wages. Rather than pay more wages, they want to leave and farm elsewhere where farming is more profitable. So a wage determination will be a good thing.

Some farmers do not even pay the

workers. I know a place in Rustenburg where the farmer gives the workers mealie meal, saying that is their wages. The workers should be able to choose whether they want mealie meal or wages. We are encouraging the workers to take the money and buy mealie meal elsewhere. However, the workers say that they don't have the time or transport to buy the mealie meal themselves.



Zacharia Mohanoe.

Bulletin: *What is the position of women farmworkers and the issues facing them?*

Mohanoe: There are many challenges facing women on farms. They are discriminated against because they are paid less than men. Farmers also give women jobs, which they call easy jobs, and then pay the women very low wages.

Women with small babies are expected to work with their babies on their backs. There is no crèche or safe place to leave the babies while they are working. Also, when women want to go on maternity leave they are dismissed. We, as the union, are fighting these things. We are trying by all means to get the farmers to take responsibility for the workers.

Bulletin: *Why is the NUF affiliated to NACTU?*

Mohanoe: I need to point out that we are a project of NACTU. Until we are self-sustainable and able to be an independent

union, we will be assisted by NACTU. So when it comes to affiliation there is no doubt that we are affiliated to NACTU. At our congress we will decide whether to remain an affiliate.

Bulletin: *How does the NUF engage government on policies that may affect its members?*

Mohanoe: We channel our grievances through NACTU or the other affiliates of NACTU. NACTU guides us and is our spokesperson. For example, we have raised the issue of child labour and so it is now being debated.

Bulletin: *Does the NUF have links with community organisations?*

Mohanoe: In 2000, the NACTU general secretary employed people to strengthen and restructure the union. Only then could we liaise with other organisations. So I am now in the process of addressing other organisations and NGOs. We need to



Workers hope NUF will change the conditions on farms for them.

include those organisations. Our union cannot address issues such as HIV/AIDS and child labour alone. I have told the organisers in Nelspruit to look for NGOs that are operating in that area.

Bulletin: *What is your position on the issue of land, for example the Zimbabwe situation?*

Mobanoë: We have not taken a position on that, but the general feeling of workers is that they are not going to be hostile as is happening in Zimbabwe. However, a Zimbabwe type of a situation will answer some of their problems. For example, a worker was saying that if the union is not recognised it is better to take the farm. This is not our policy.

These kinds of talk emanate from farms where workers believe they are in a position to lead the farms. We will recommend at our congress that farmworkers need to look at the possibility of buying the farm whether that farm grows flowers or vegetables or

anything else. This can assist the workers with an income and help fight unemployment.

Bulletin: *Do you have a message for your members?*

Mobanoë: Workers must know that they are on their own. They must not have high expectations that the government will remove all obstacles. Government has paved the way by drafting the LRA. It is still a long way, but the workers must work hard and persevere. Nobody is going to do it for them, but themselves.

Bulletin: *Do you have a message for the bosses?*

Mobanoë: The farm owners determine the workers' conditions. The owners must move away from the stand that they have taken. To resist will not do them any good. If they are not willing to move then the workers are going to assist them to do so. ★