

Municipal union in firing line

The international officer of the South African Municipal Workers Union **Steve Faulkner** talks to the union's media and publicity officer **Tahir Sema** about important decisions that Samwu has recently made, such as its refusal to campaign for the ANC in local government elections and its three-week strike against corruption and labour broking.

SF: Samwu called for mass action on 15 May, a few days before local government elections. Why this protest at such a strategic moment?

TS: The decision to take a range of actions was decided unanimously at the last CEC [Central Executive Committee]. This built on a previous resolution that pointed out that it would be very difficult for the union to campaign in the elections when there were a range of issues outstanding.

SF: What are the outstanding issues?

TS: Foremost we are very concerned about the lack of action by government on corruption. We have been raising our concerns for over three years, and we are still waiting for action. People must understand that it is our members who are in the municipalities seeing corruption take place before their very eyes. They handle the paperwork that is submitted by tenderpreneurs, and they know correct procedures are not being followed, and that undue influence is being exerted illegally.

SF: You mean clerks and other council employees who have to process tender applications?

TS: Exactly. Many of our members have risked everything by saying this must be stopped. Not only that, but our members who are supposed to deliver services, who put in or fix the water pipes, connect electricity and mend roads for the community watch in horror as private contractors are brought in by the same tenderpreneurs to do work which should be done by the municipality. Not only is the work substandard, but it is undertaken by workers recruited by labour brokers who are not paid the municipal minimum, and who have little protection. Like nearly all brokered workers they are super exploited.

SF: Does this contribute to service delivery protests?

TS: Of course! If you use workers who do not know what they are supposed to do, and who are forced to work under pressure to keep costs down, they do not do the job properly, and communities get angry. Communities who were promised services get them substandard and because there is no maintenance relationships break

down. Our members also live in these communities. It is impossible for them to be blind to what is happening on the ground.

SF: Many people were surprised that the recent three-week Pikitup strike in April was not mainly about pay, but about the need to tackle corruption and unfair treatment.

TS: It was a remarkable action, and we have learnt a lot of lessons from it.

Firstly, it showed that the fight against corruption is a union issue. If you allow corruption to take place, it will impact on working conditions not least because money goes into private pockets instead of providing a service to be delivered by our members.

Secondly, the dispute showed that it is possible to mobilise permanent workers on behalf of contract workers, and that class solidarity can mean something in practice if the case is made clearly, and if the leadership explains what is needed. Permanent staff linked arms with contract staff to demand that all casual workers were made permanent because they could see the benefit to not just the workers, but to the community.

Further many Pikitup workers were women who were vulnerable and who had experienced all manner of bad treatment, but when they were given the opportunity to organise they were amazing. Many strong women leaders have emerged from the strike, and they are already changing the way the union looks at gender issues.

Thirdly, the dispute has shown that it is possible to take the fight against privatisation to another level. Pikitup is supposed to be a wholly owned company run by the municipality, but it was actually behaving like a private company, putting profit before services and the needs of our people. As soon as the corruption was exposed, look how the board of Pikitup jumped ship [they resigned]. They had no commitment to service whatsoever, and as soon as it appeared that 'business' practices were to be challenged, they dumped it.

The next stage is to take it back into full municipal control, so that the service and those who run it can be held accountable. Business and service delivery simply do not work for our communities.

SF: There was a lot of public support for Pikitup workers. Did this surprise you?

TS: There clearly is a strong feeling amongst the public that something must be done about corruption, but also about the disparities between workers' pay, and those who never get their hands dirty in CEO's offices. Hundreds of well wishers sent in messages, spoke on radio and commented to strikers that they were behind them. There's no doubt about it, when our union and our federation Cosatu (Congress of South African Trade Unions) make a stand against corruption and super exploitation, the South African public will rally to their cause.

SF: In addition to corruption and labour brokers, what are the other demands that make it

impossible for Samwu to work in the election campaign?

TS: Some demands relate to outstanding grievances we have with employers who are represented by Salga (South African Local Government Association). We took industrial action almost two years ago and eventually signed an agreement on grading and pay issues. But the employers tampered with the agreement that we reached, and altered its terms. We are outraged that so-called responsible employers should behave in this way, against the spirit of collective bargaining. So we are drawing attention to this also, and we want to put pressure on the employers, who are local government, to stop behaving like cowboys.

SF: Samwu's decision to abstain from election campaigning has created quite a storm.

TS: I think there are a few analysts who have not understood our position, and a few politicians who need to read what we have been saying more carefully. Samwu is part of the Alliance through Cosatu (including SA Communist Party and ANC) and remains so. We continue to call for our members, and the working class as a whole, to vote for the ANC at local government elections. However, we have said that it is impossible at present, given the attacks that our members are experiencing in many provinces, for us to actively campaign for the ANC while our grievances are not addressed.

In some municipalities members are being victimised and threatened for daring to expose corruption, and yet they are being asked to campaign for the same corrupt people to be re-elected!

In other municipalities, we have faced mass sacking as we did in Tshwane where a thousand members' jobs were put on the line. How are we supposed to campaign for those who want to destroy our union and the well

being of thousands of households?

One of our leading shop stewards was killed by police a few months ago in a completely unprovoked attack, and yet nothing has been done to bring those responsible to court. How can we campaign in this environment? We are ready to talk, but we really do want more than talks. We want action.

SF: Some in governing circles have hinted that Samwu might have another agenda or are exploiting the election period for selfish gains.

TS: Our decisions were made in a profoundly democratic manner. They are in the public domain. Anyone can go to our website or read one of our statements saying what our positions are and why we are pursuing them. There will be those who try and manufacture interpretations to suit their own purposes, but read our statements. They are clear.

The pressure on our members through corruption, labour brokers, victimisation, poverty wages, dishonest employers and privatisation does not stop while the elections are taking place. These are challenges that face our members every day, and we would be neglecting our members if we suspended our actions because it was politically expedient. The class struggle does not stop when elections take place!

SF: Will members back the union on this?

TS: No doubt. Our mandate came from below where our members feel these issues the hardest. The strength of feeling is unprecedented, and not just amongst Samwu members. We are receiving strong indications of support from other unionists and working-class communities. Any person looking at the demands of the union should see that what we are campaigning for are improvements for the poor as a whole. **LB**