

# *'no unity at plant level before a federation merger'*

**Labour Bulletin:** *How did the congress handle the question of workers' unity?*

**Samela:** The issue of unity of the working class was thoroughly debated. In principle, SACWU is not opposed to unity. But it is important to look at what happened before SACWU's congress.

COSATU and NACTU held a number of meetings in preparation for the workers' summit which was to take place in May. We were not opposed to that. We are against an attempt to first force mergers at the plant level. We would like to see the two federations merging before talking of unity at the shopfloor.

SACWU feels strongly if there is to be genuine unity of the working class, we need to lay down certain principles at the level of the federation. Both federations are leaning heavily on political groups.

We do not want a federation that is indifferent to politics as politics permeates all aspects of society. A trade union federation must accommodate all workers, irrespective of political affiliation.

**Labour Bulletin:** *Did SACWU have any problems with the proposed workers' summit organised by COSATU/NACTU?*

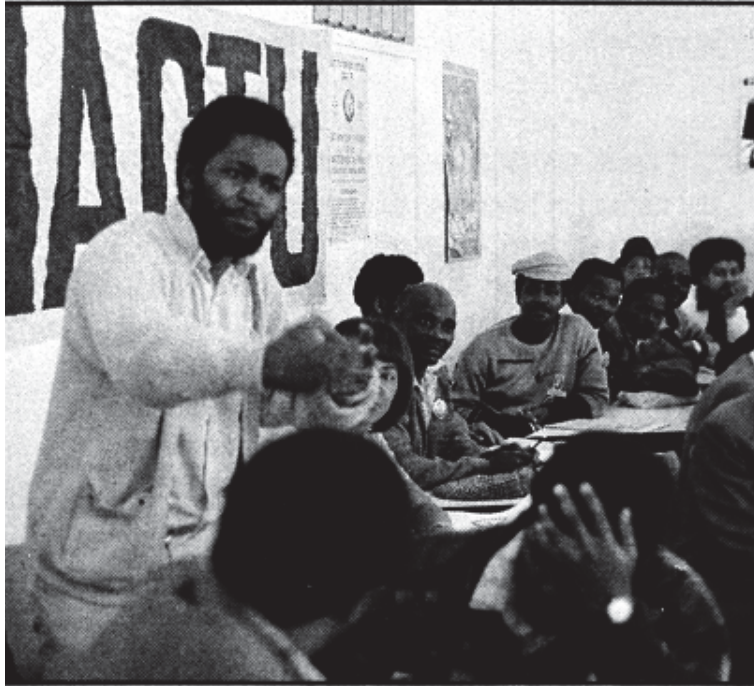
**Samela:** Our problem was that a decision had already been taken that affiliates should

In May, the 45 000 strong South African Chemical Workers Union (SACWU) held its 8th congress. Workers' unity was a key topic of discussion. SNUKI ZIKALALA asked SACWU's national organiser MANENE SAMELA for his views on unity, mass action and the future of the trade union movement.

discuss mergers. We did not agree with that decision. We discussed it in our locals and could not come to terms with it.

What annoyed us was that at the preparatory meetings for the workers' summit, discussions centred around the merging of CWIU (Chemical Workers Industrial Union - affiliated to COSATU) and SACWU. It is impossible for that to happen without discussions at federation level.

The two federations must first solve the question of unity before it can be discussed by



Manene Samela

Photo: NACTU

the affiliates.\* In their discussions they must accommodate the independent unions.

**Labour Bulletin:** *Are you looking forward to another workers' summit?*

**Samela:** That is a resolution taken by NACTU and we support it. We have suggested NACTU initiate the resumption of the workers' summit. An agenda must be drawn up to accommodate all the affiliates and the independent unions.

**Labour Bulletin:** *What other pertinent issues did congress discuss?*

**Samela:** The focus was on internal re-adjustment. SACWU is a worker-controlled union. Administrators and officials do not participate in debates. Their role as office bearers is to provide workers with necessary information.

The congress also rationalised the union's structures. Workers wanted the union run more efficiently. We have acknowledged there is a lot of legal work and as such there are a lot of legal cases and costs. Workers at the congress

decided there should be a legal department.

Comrade Hendrick Molefe, an accountant, was elected as the general secretary. The department of education, which deals with the training of shopstewards, was revamped. Workers also adopted a resolution for a centralised provident fund.

**Labour Bulletin:** *Did SACWU support the last mass action?*

**Samela:** We did not support mass action. The 3-4 August mass action was COSATU's programme. We were expected to tell our members they should participate. If COSATU had planned the mass action with us it would have been something else.

The mass action was on the agenda for the workers' summit which did not take place. Our understanding of mass action is that we have to remove the government. This is what we were advocating. We were actually talking along the lines of a general strike to force the government out of power.

Granted, mass action took place and millions of workers participated, but the state is still intact. De Klerk did not move an inch. Very little was achieved. As trade unions we need to discuss this as soon as possible.

**Labour Bulletin:** *Will the non-participation of SACWU members in mass action cause tension among workers at plant level with those who participated; with members of CWIU for instance?*

**Samela:** I don't think there will be tension as we have explained to our workers why we did not support mass action.

We don't have problems with CWIU. Among our members, there are those who are demanding that we should explain the confusion going on before mass action. The meeting between COSATU and SACCOLA confused workers. The employers are part and parcel of the state. De Klerk is their machinery.

\* For a different view within NACTU, see November Nkosi, Profile, p85.





*SACWU wage strike at Janssen Pharmaceuticals*

*Photo: William Matlala*

**Labour Bulletin:** *Do you experience a situation where there are conflicts between workers belonging to SACWU and those of CWIU?*

**Samela:** There are conflicts at plant level. But I think those conflicts arise through lack of education. We have fairly active members in senior positions in the ANC but committed to SACWU. We do not agree with organisations which want their political activists to dominate, as we are in opposition to party politics in trade union affairs.

Our one problem with CWIU is they encourage their members not to take part in strikes we organise. We once had a strike in Modderfontein and CWIU told its members not to take part. This divides the workers. Some of the workers are being influenced in street committees not to take part in SACWU's organisational activities.

**Labour Bulletin:** *Is there a possibility of a merger between SACWU and CWIU?*

**Samela:** It depends on what I said earlier on. It also depends on the political climate in the

country. Once we have the so-called interim government and an elected constituent assembly, things are going to change.

We can only merge when there is one federation in the country.

**Labour Bulletin:** *How is SACWU bargaining in this sector?*

**Samela:** We are bargaining at plant and company level. We were once involved with the industrial council, but that council was not national. It was based in Cape Town. We found 70% of the employers were owners of small companies and most decisions were taken by them. We realised the best thing was to negotiate at plant level. We have achieved a lot since taking that approach.

We are now thinking of negotiating nationally, as it appears we will have a centralised provident fund. This will eventually lead us to discuss wages and conditions of employment nationally. We are also ensuring conditions of employment are similar in all companies. Workers are beginning to understand the importance of centralised bargaining since they started at plant level.



**Labour Bulletin:** *Is it true SACWU is now organising in other sectors, becoming a general union?*

**Samela:** For the past eight years, companies like AECI, SASOL and Sentrachem started contracting out certain services. One of their arguments is that at AECI, for instance, they only manufacture explosives and chemicals. Sentrachem says they are just manufacturing chemicals while SASOL is just manufacturing petrol, oil and other products. They are now saying that for transport, building, maintenance, cleaning and cooking they would prefer to use subcontractors.

With subcontracting, workers were left without any representation. Subcontractors are known for their brutality and violation of workers' rights.

We then had to go out and organise these workers. We feel they have the same grievances as other workers although they come from different sectors. Workers who used to belong to Transport and General Union have joined us. I have to make it clear we don't poach workers, we organise them properly. SACWU does not intend to become a general union.

**Labour Bulletin:** *SACWU has been organising predominately black workers (Africans, coloureds and Indians). Has that situation changed?*

**Samela:** When I came into SACWU in the early 80s, there were no whites. You must accept the feelings and the attitude of the workers during those days. In the last five years we changed our constitution and presently we do have white members in our union. But NACTU's policy is to advance black leadership and that is why you don't find white workers in senior positions of the union.

I agree with that policy, we need to encourage it. In Europe or Asia you will find the indigenous people are the ones in the forefront.

**Labour Bulletin:** *Is SACWU aligned to the PAC?*

**Samela:** No, we are not. We have PAC members in the union. We are not going to say that when we form one federation people should not belong to political parties. We also have members of Inkatha Freedom Party, AZAPO, Unity Movement and the ANC in SACWU. One has to reconcile the union's position with those of the workers.

We have held seminars where we called the ANC but they never showed up. We want their views to be heard by the workers.

**Labour Bulletin:** *How do you see the future of the trade union movement after the election of the constituent assembly and the establishment of a new and democratic government?*

**Samela:** It is a complex question. It will depend on what is coming during the interim government. Definitely, there will be a realignment of forces. It is inevitable. We don't want to see the Polish situation repeated in our country.

**Labour Bulletin:** *Do you think the future government will change the workers' social status?*

**Samela:** No. In my opinion, the key thing that will determine the future of the working class is the relation between those who own the means of production and the productive forces. We will have to see how the coming government relates to the capitalist.

At the moment, workers are taking an active part in mass action and will vote for a new government. They seem to trust political parties and leaders. They don't realise when the party they support gets into parliament things will change. It is only then workers will realise they have made a number of mistakes. They will get the right to vote and that is it. Their economic situation is not going to change at all.

I believe the future of the working class will be determined by the workers. Politicians play games and will never take care of workers' interests. ☆