

# 'Not a woof-woof union'

**Bulletin:** *When was NACTU formed?*

**Ngcukana:** NACTU was formed on 5 and 6 October 1986 as a result of the merger between the Council of Unions of SA (CUSA) and the Azanian Congress of Trade Unions (AZACTU).

**Bulletin:** *How many members do you have and who are they?*

**Ngcukana:** We currently have 392 000 members. We have a great diversity of members mostly in the lower end of the labour market. Our agricultural union has about 47 000 members and we also have a large public sector membership. There our union is the National Public Sector Workers Union (NPSWU), formed in 1964. Some of our members in the public sector are in management.

Our membership is located throughout the country but we are especially strong in KwaZulu-Natal, Gauteng, Northern Province and Mpumalanga. We are also growing in the Eastern Cape.

**Bulletin:** *How many affiliates do you have?*

**Ngcukana:** We have 19 affiliates. We merged unions in the metal sector and expelled two affiliates last year. Sometimes you have to decline to grow. If people are not part of the vision and principles of the

**Etienne Vlok and Rugaya**

**Rees interview Cunningham**

**Ngcukana, general secretary of the National Council of Trade Unions (NACTU).**

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federation then they have to leave. Our strongest affiliates are the SA Chemical Workers' Union (SACWU), the largest agriculture union - the National Union of Farmworkers (NUF), the Building, Construction and Allied Workers Union (BCAWU) and the National Union of Food, Beverages, Spirit and Wine (NUFBSAW). We have the largest furniture union, the National Union of Furniture and Allied Workers (NUFAW), in Africa.

We think that our construction union can do better as the industry has a low percentage of organisation. A federation is nothing else but its affiliates.

We had to restructure our affiliates and get them into a new way of thinking and doing. We have to go back to the basics to realise what we are here for. Trade unions are about numbers and the type of members that you are organising. You can only survive if you organise.

**Bulletin:** *Why should a union join NACTU instead of another federation?*

*Ngcukana:* The reality is that unions are just going to join NACTU. We have a constitution, policies and principles which they have to accept. You have to accept our policies or you are out. In 1997 we expelled the Media Workers Association of SA (MWASA), the largest local media union with 26 000 members.

Our main policy is the independence of the labour movement – not to affiliate to a political party. Individuals can. Look at what COSATU is experiencing. If you are linked to a political party that is governing, you are going to have a lot of divisions. Some will believe that the union must follow the government's policies while others will want to follow union policies. Another policy is democratic principles. We want to see unions have an executive, executive meetings, constitution and congresses. They must hold regular elections and their structures must work. It is no use to have a big union that is undemocratic.

NACTU believes in socialism and we are unapologetic about it. It is not the socialism of right-wing politics. People are saying we should consider what is called 'the third way' by Anthony Giddens, the personal advisor to Tony Blair. It is rubbish. Socialism is still valid. As the working class in this country, we should fight for the nationalisation of the commanding heights of this economy. We should fight that workers control their investments.

Who is Old Mutual? It is ordinary workers' money. When Mike Levett speaks as a business person, who makes him a business person? The pension funds of workers and the insurance policies of ordinary people.

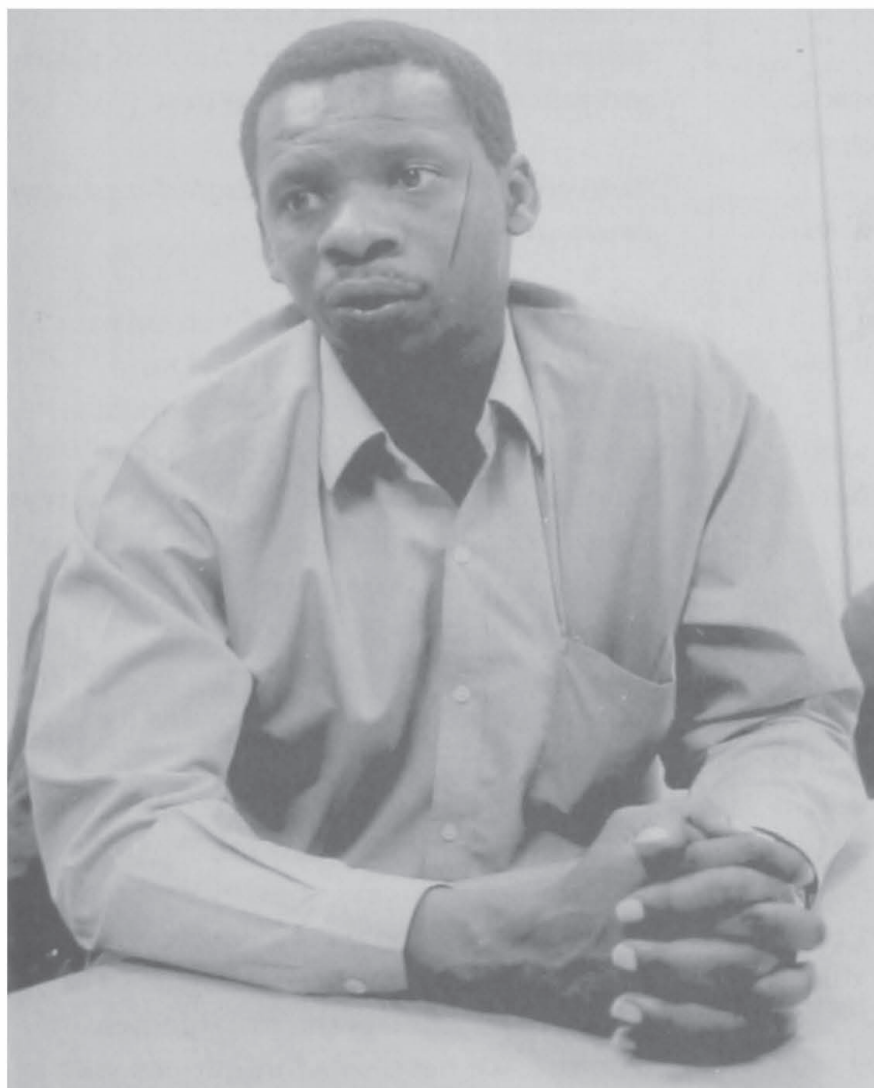
We don't control those investments. Pension fund and insurance companies use the monies of working people to attack us. These are the things that as the working class in this country we need to address.

*Bulletin:* How are you recruiting new members?

*Ngcukana:* The responsibility of organising lies with the affiliates. Last year we decided to adopt an organising programme or recruitment drive. It will run for a year and we are employing 40 organisers from 1 May. They will be attached to particular industries. Our seven provincial offices along with ten organising offices will be involved in the project. We want one million members by the year 2005. What we want is to ensure that NACTU is strong and representative. We need to have an effective presence in various sectors if we are to be respected as an organisation. We are not looking to get members from COSATU affiliates, we are looking to recruit new people. Take KwaZulu-Natal – it has 90 unaffiliated unions. This shows that there is great dissatisfaction among workers.

We will focus on all the sectors in the recruitment drive, but especially, the agricultural sector. We have employed an administration secretary and organisers to concentrate on farmworkers. We will concentrate on the Northern Province, KwaZulu-Natal, Gauteng and Mpumalanga. The farmworkers' situation has not changed. They are still living in the past. They see a new president but what has actually changed for them?

We just had a strategic planning workshop where we trained the leadership of NACTU. One thing that emerged is that a great number of workers are looking for a new home. We need to see what kind of trade unions we are and what sets NACTU and its affiliates apart from others. We need to address the concerns of workers, look at the quality of our service, organisers and staff. We need people that are committed to representing the workers.



*Cunningham Ngcukana, NACTU general secretary.*

**Bulletin:** *You want to grow by more than a 100% when many workers are moving to temporary, contract or casual work. Can you do it taking into account this trend?*

**Ngcukana:** Yes, we need to organise and change the trend. Look at the supermarkets. Probably only 10% of their staff are permanent. Even the merchandisers are employed by contractors. In various industries they are contracting out non-core business, even government and the mines. It's an ideological question that emerges and, as a class, we need to condemn it. We need to fight this trend and put pressure on the government. We have legislation in place

so that we do not have this kind of insecurity in the workplace like we did in the past. We need a strategic approach on how to organise and service casual workers. We are currently working on that.

Concerning globalisation, there is nothing wrong with a global economy but there is a lot wrong with globalisation. It is an ideological question of multinational corporations, the movement of capital, trade, cross-border transactions and the loss of power by countries. These are some of the difficult things that we are trying to address and work against.

**Bulletin:** *You have not received as much publicity as FEDUSA and COSATU. Why is this?*

**Ngcukana:** What we have been focusing on these past two or three years was

restructuring the federation. We are not seeking publicity just to make a name for ourselves. Comrade Bill Fletcher from America raised an important thing: there is this dog called Woof-woof. It barks too much with very little bite. It says 'Don't do this. If you do, I'll bite you.' Whilst the labour movement is under attack, people are just barking.

Let us take the tripartite alliance - actually 'the tripartite alliance plus one' as Inkatha is also part of it. Privatisation is taking place and unions in those sectors are not doing very much. People are just barking while thousands of workers are losing their jobs. If you don't fight those things it is to the detriment of the workers. We have massive retrenchments

by a government that lied to the people, that spoke about 'jobs for all'.

Take inflation targeting. It presupposes equality in terms of incomes. It presupposes that society has been transformed.

Inflation targeting means that you want to control prices including wages as it is the cost of labour. Inflation targeting will hinder reducing the wage gap. It will not help transformation. If you see a government pursuing such policies and mouthing transformation, it means there is no transformation. If you go to public hospitals today, they were better under apartheid. The public health system is going down, the educational system is going down. People are being lied to.

One of the reasons that governments in Africa and other countries are able to lie is because of the illiteracy of workers in terms of understanding economics. Economics determines politics. I don't agree with Sam [Mbhizima] Shilowa that the alliance is not formed on macro-economic policy. The basic difference between political parties throughout the world is on macro-economic policies. And if you differ economically you also differ politically. You should not lie to people and say 'Let us differ economically'.

You cannot separate economics and politics. You cannot say we support you politically but we differ from you on economic policies. If you are privatising, you are pursuing right-wing economics. And you still say 'I am a leftist in the alliance'. It is lying and deceit. People are being lied to and NACTU has a responsibility to correct this.

*Bulletin: What are the chances of merging with another federation?*

*Ngcukana:* We will not set any preconditions. The only condition is an independent labour movement with

working class policies. There is a difference in putting something on paper and following and believing in it.

*Bulletin: How is NACTU staffed and what structures do you have?*

*Ngcukana:* We have got seven provincial offices and 47 staff members. Our decision-making body is the national congress, the second structure is the national council, which meets twice a year, and the central committee, which meets ten times a year. Representation at the national congress is proportional: every union has ten delegates for the first 5 000 members and then two delegates for every thousand thereafter.

The congress elects leadership, decides on policies and can amend the constitution. It meets once every three years. At the national council every 5 000 members gives you three delegates. The central committee is the management structure. We have sub-committees such as the international, staffing and education committees. The education committee consists of the affiliates' educators. We are trying to establish a media department and a publication for shopstewards on economic developments particularly. Our regions and locals sit every month. One of our campaigns is to revive all our structures and make sure they all function.

*Bulletin: Are women represented on the structures?*

*Ngcukana:* The gender unit falls under the education sub-committee because we believe gender issues are education matters. There is nothing like a union for women. Women are union members, women issues are union issues. Part of the problem of the marginalisation of women is that you have women's committees.

## List of NACTU affiliates

BCAWU	Building, Construction and Allied Workers Union
BIFAWU	Banking, Insurance, Finances and Assurance Workers Union
HIAWU	Hospitality Industries and Allied Workers Union
HOTELICCA	Hotel, Liquor, Catering, Commercial and Allied Workers of SA
MESHAWU	Municipality, Education, State, Health and Allied Workers Union
MEWUSA	Metal, Electrical and Allied Workers Union
NACTWUSA	National Clothing and Textile Workers Union of SA
NAMPSWU	National Municipal, Public Service Workers Union
NASAWU	National Security Workers Union
NPSWU	National Public Sector Workers Union
NUF	National Union of Farmworkers
NUFAW	National Union of Furniture and Allied Workers
NUFBSAW	National Union of Food, Beverages, Spirit and Wine
PSU	Parliamentary Staff Union
SACWU	South African Chemical Workers Union
TAWU	Transport and Allied Workers Union
TOWU	Transport and Omnibus Workers Union

People never do anything about gender issues because women are in that committee.

We will have quotas at our congress. The congress elects the president, deputy president, three vice-presidents, treasurer, deputy treasurer, general secretary and assistant general secretary. At least three of them should be women. At the next congress we want to see improved representation and participation of women.

People oppose quotas but if you don't have quotas then people don't do anything. We will have a quota system for

a particular time and then stop it.

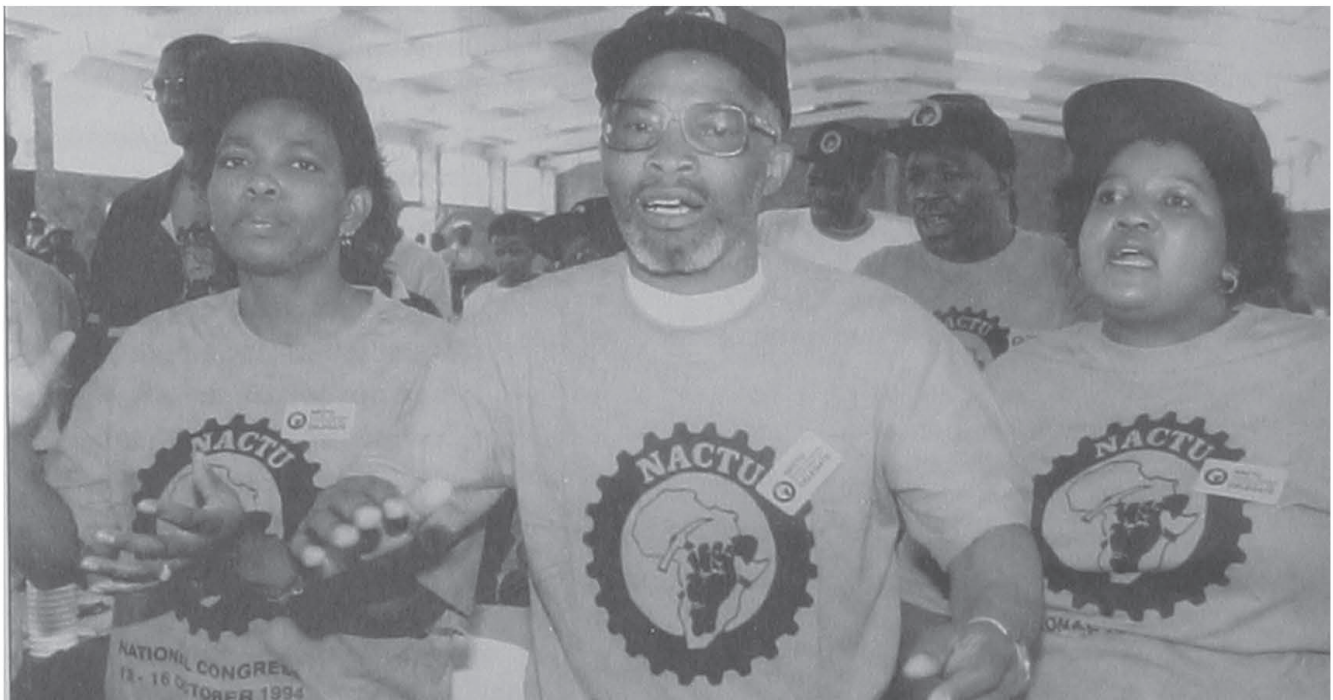
*Bulletin:* What major campaigns are you currently running?

*Ngcukana:* Our organising campaign is the major campaign. We are also busy with an HIV/AIDS campaign. We have an irresponsible government that has allocated only R75-million to HIV/AIDS.

If you are attacked by another country and it kills the number of people that HIV/AIDS is killing, would the government put away only R75-million to fight it? I don't think so. As NACTU, we take HIV/AIDS as a class issue. It affects those in poverty. The government is a bourgeois government and because it is bourgeois it is irresponsible. Even the president makes irresponsible statements on HIV/AIDS.

The question of education is another major class issue. The children of the working class are the ones that fail and struggle to get entrance and money to attend universities and other institutions. It is the children of the working class who are not assured of a future.

A key issue for us is education of the workers. Not the magic wand type. People must look at their class interest: 'What is in it for me as a worker?' We want workers to understand economics and related issues such as inflation targeting. As NACTU we will organise, mobilise and create an awareness. SADTU and SAMWU workers



*NACTU's national congress is its decision-making body.*

have been retrenched, yet they will support the ANC again in the next elections. You march against job losses but you support the same government in the next elections. There has to be a public awareness and workers need to be educated. If we are able to remove ignorance we would have done a good job.

**Bulletin:** *What are your weaknesses?*

**Ngcukana:** Our major weaknesses are organisation and worker education. We need to improve them.

**Bulletin:** *What is your stance on the upcoming local elections?*

**Ngcukana:** NACTU says 'Look at the policies of your party. Are they in your class interest? Then vote!' At the moment we do not say people should vote for a specific party but it could change. We do encourage people to participate democratically.

**Bulletin:** *Are you involved with COSATU in the marches against job losses?*

**Ngcukana:** No, we are not because we need to understand the basis of their campaigns. They put people in power and then fight against the policies of those people. COSATU gave those who are implementing iGoli 2002 a mandate. They voted them into office, so COSATU must accept their decisions. The government privatises and then COSATU votes for them again. We are concerned with the stance of the SACP, a communist party, regarding government's economic policy. Dishonesty is the saddest part of South African politics.

**Bulletin:** *What message do you have for your members?*

**Ngcukana:** We have gained political freedom, now we must get economic freedom as well. The class war is still on. A black president does not mean economic freedom. ★