



## Racial discrimination in the workplace: SAMWU workers speak out

***"We as workers from the South African Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU) are still seriously affected by the racial discrimination which has been going on for years in our sector. In the local authorities or municipalities we are faced with racial discrimination in many different forms."***  
***- Sonnyboy Matsoso, Molapi Mathibe and Richard Spalding***

### **Problems getting into local authority employment**

First of all, even to get into the local authorities, whites are always favoured. Management offers employment but the councillors are the ones who take a final decision as to who is to be employed after interviews have been conducted. They disregard the knowledge and practical experience that black workers have accumulated on the job, and will employ whites just because they can submit formal education papers.

This demotivates us. Even if we have the chance to study and improve ourselves on the job, we know that in the end we will never be considered.

### **Blacks train whites and often do their jobs**

Racial discrimination is so naked in the municipality. You find that a white worker who comes in simply with a standard seven will be given a responsible position immediately. We have to take the responsibility of teaching them the job - and yet they earn more than we do, and then they boss us around and can eventually even fire us.

We are very concerned about whites who are recruited and don't have the necessary skills and knowledge. Often they cannot do the work and black workers do their jobs for them. All the whites do is ask "waar moet ek teken?" (where must I sign?).

### **Blacks always have to start 'at the bottom'**

As a black worker in the municipality, irrespective of your qualifications, you have to start at the bottom. You are told that you have to work your way up the ladder. Promotion is a long and arduous process.

This discourages people. That is why black people, even from universities, don't go into the public sector because they have to start at the bottom, irrespective of their qualifications.

Senior positions in the municipality have always been reserved for whites. A big fight from the workers' side has led the local authorities to change their

strategy. Nowadays, if there are ten vacancies, eight of them will be filled by whites and the remaining two will be for blacks. Then they proudly proclaim their "model management!"

We are convinced that the local authorities and the Ministry of Local Affairs are not committed to change. It is only our relentless efforts and pressure that will force them to really change.

### **Selection for training**

We also continue to have serious problems when it comes to the selection for training for skilled jobs. Knowing very well that black workers are educationally disadvantaged, employers set high minimum qualification levels. This disadvantages the black working class and opens doors for whites to fill the posts or go for further training.

We think that blacks who have been doing the job for years must be entitled to go for training even without 'papers'. There must be a balance between experience and formal qualifications.

### **Retraining not retrenchments**

Today many blacks are being retrenched. We say that there is no need for this. Management should see where vacancies exist and if, for example, someone has worked in the cleansing branch but there is a vacancy in roads, that person should be trained in roads. Rather than sacking people, there should be training on the

job and retraining to utilise the capabilities of a person in other fields.

### **Racial favouritism and corruption**

Councillors are supposed to be politicians looking after community affairs. However, many of them want to interfere in our work places. The majority still believe a white worker is better than a black worker, and they get their white friends to come in and work in the municipalities. So, apart from racial discrimination, racial favouritism is also rife and there is lack of accountability.

Corruption is rife in the municipality. We have to fight so that the trade unions are involved in the appointment of consultants to study and clamp down on this. We believe that in this way we could begin to get rid of the corruption and racial favouritism that is rife in our sector.

We would like to see the black and local authorities being disbanded, so that we can have a negotiated interim forum for the transitional period.

### **How will this be changed?**

We believe that racial discrimination at the work place will never be solved only through parliamentary legislation.

Racial discrimination is not something that came by nature or law. It is something that the bosses created.

In some councils or local authorities, there are people

who are keen to change but there are others who are not.

We don't believe that there is some sort of institution that can change people's perception or racial attitudes. We don't believe that we should go to parliament for people to change. We believe that workers should fight for their rights, because it is their right to be recognised as human beings and as workers and be treated equally, regardless of colour, race or creed.

At the end of the day, we believe that if we are really prepared to fight for our rights, people will understand that these are our rights and they will start accepting that.

The position is that for years there was legislated apartheid. Despite the fact that the legislation has now been removed, the attitudes remain. Today workers still feel that a lot of window dressing takes place. Racial discrimination at the work place is just more subtle.

From our perspective, the need is not only to look at what the law enshrines. The processes of humanising the workplace is important. People's attitudes and their perceptions, their understanding that the community as a whole must know what is done in the workplace, are important and an ongoing process. It will take time: in some cases a bit faster and in other cases slower, depending on the attitude of management and those who control the local authorities. ☆