

'Justice for all'

Bulletin: When and why was POPCRU formed?

Witbooi: POPCRU was formed on 5 November 1989 in Cape Town. In the past there was no union in the police and correctional services. POPCRU was formed because of a need and because of the challenges facing workers - discrimination, poor working conditions and the like

We adopted the slogan 'justice for all' because we did not agree with the way people and prisoners were being unfairly treated. We also did not agree with the disparities that existed in terms of remuneration and benefits.

As a result, we adopted a programme of action and called for the transformation of the police force and correctional services. We also set our self the goal of improving remuneration, improving working conditions and fighting discrimination - for example, promotions and placements were based on race not capability.

It was not easy getting recognition. For example, 250 members in Diepkloof Prison were suspended for standing up against the conditions in which they were living. It was also not legal for us to join a union until 1994.

Bulletin: What is your membership and how are you trying to increase it?

*Tanya van Meelis and
Rugaya Rees interview Abbey
Witbooi - general secretary of
POPCRU.*

Witbooi: We have 44 000 members in the South African Police Services (SAPS), 20 000 members in correctional services and 2 000 members in the traffic department. There was a stage when membership numbers were standing still. We asked why, because POPCRU has credibility. We found that there was a strategy to stop POPCRU from growing - management was not processing stop orders. So we decided to change systems and started using magnetic tape. The result was that membership rose by 5 000. That caused SAPU (the South African Police Union) to panic - we have closed the gap between our membership to about 14 000. We also decided to embark on an annual recruitment programme for a month. We want to be the majority union in the sector.

Bulletin: What major problems do your members experience at work?

Witbooi: Our members are paid a very low minimum wage - level 3 pays R27 444 gross per annum. Our proposal is that the

minimum wage should start at level 5 because people are so grossly underpaid. There is also disparity in what people are paid - for example the Durban City Police are paid more than the SAPS. If we look at experience abroad, we find that the lower ranks here are underpaid and we want to meet international standards.

Another problem relates to how people are promoted under the current system. It promotes people for studying, not working. This encourages people not to work - if you walk into a police station you will find a policeman studying in the corner and not working. Performance should be a major requirement for promotion. People must also remain in active policing and not be promoted so that they work behind a desk. The structure is too heavy on top.

We believe that in order for a person to be effective, he or she should not be subjected to long hours of work. You cannot be effective if you work for eight hours - you need to rest so that you can be alert and focused. Conditions are difficult and dangerous so you have to be alert and focused. But, people just come to work, work and then go home stressed. Because there is no counselling, many land up trying to drink their problems away in shebeens.

Another problem has to do with allowances. People are given a danger allowance when they work in areas where there is high crime. But this results in people not working when they are posted to areas where there is low crime. Our position is that all in police work and correctional services are exposed to crime, so they should all be given the same allowance.

Bulletin: To what extent have you been affected by retrenchments and privatisation?

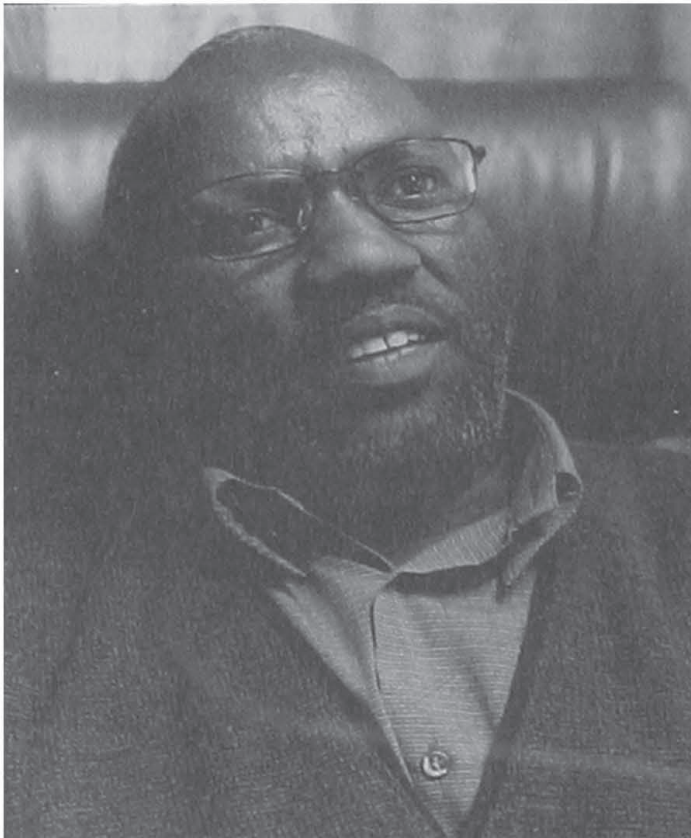
Wilbooi: We have not been affected much by retrenchment as the government needs to employ police and prison warders to cope with crime and overcrowding in prison. The ratio of prisoners to warders remains high - this results in members taking sick leave to cope with stress. It also contributes to escapes, which is a major concern for us.

We are aware of the privatisation of prisons. We want to be informed of what unions are experiencing abroad so that we can develop responses. If you look at the policing trend in the country - it is moving to privatisation, especially if you look at the rate of growth of the private security industry. Where the police cannot provide the same services as a private security company, people will outsource security. Retrenchments are thus coming for us in the long run. We are conducting research that will inform us how to respond and prepare ourselves.

Bulletin: What other unions exist in the sector and what is your relationship like with them?

Wilbooi: There were five unions in the sector. When the SSSBC (the Safety and Security Sectoral Bargaining Council) was set up the threshold was 10 000. Only POPCRU, SAPU and PSA made the threshold. The threshold was then pushed to 20 000, so PSA deregistered because it did not have the membership.

SAPU, at its last congress, took a decision to merge with us. We made a commitment to merge in our 1998 Congress. We formulated a document to guide us in negotiations with employers. We had a good relationship with SAPU for five to six months but then tensions emerged. We had a process on how to resolve conflict between the unions, so we were surprised to get a letter from SAPU



Abbey Witbooi, general secretary of POPCRU.

saying they were terminating our working relationship. We met when there was a lot of tension and talks broke down when we could not agree on an agenda. We felt we had accommodated their points on the agenda, but they did not want to accommodate our point - the merger. We still have to have another meeting to identify issues of concern and how to address them.

They say we have been stealing membership from them and have accused us of fraud in the media. But we never took any of their members and we have stop orders to prove it. We want to own our members and we want them to identify us. We can prove our membership, the onus is on SAPU to prove theirs.

Bulletin: *What are your structures?*

Witbooi: At national level we have a congress that meets every three years; a central executive committee (CEC) that meets twice a year; and a national

executive council (NEC) that meets four times a year. At provincial level we have a provincial congress that now meets every three years instead of every two years; a provincial general council that meets once a year; and a provincial executive committee that meets three times a year. At branch level we have a branch congress that meets every three years; a branch executive committee; local meetings and institutional/workplace meetings.

Bulletin: *POPCRU has experienced and corrected what you termed 'leadership problems'. Can you explain what happened?*

Witbooi: In 1993, our special congress released comrade Rockman to parliament. In 1995 we started to experience problems when new leaders were voted in. There was instability in the organisation. Things started to get out of hand and the CEC took steps to correct the situation in 1996. It had found that national leaders were unable to address problems emanating from various structures and that there was a lack of unity in the organisation. The CEC thus decided that national leaders should step down and interim leaders were put in place to take the union to the next congress in 1998. The new leaders were tasked with building leadership that would prioritise the needs of workers. They had to ensure that there was a shop steward in every workplace and that they were empowered to respond to workers' problems. We approached the International Labour Organisation (ILO) to help us develop a paralegal document to assist us in dealing with the high rate of dismissals and suspensions in the SAPS. The programme has not been completed yet. We are also looking at ways to empower leaders to deal with retrenchments.

Bulletin: *What are the main constitutional changes that you have made to ensure stability?*

Witbooi: We found as we were growing we weren't implementing the constitution. We had to look at the constitution and see how it would help us be effective. For example, we put in place clear guidelines on disciplining membership. We also used the constitutional changes to bring about more stability in the organisation. We also had a problem where workers failed to address and resolve leadership turnover which was unstable and also resulted in us losing skills as new leaders were continuously being elected. So we extended the term of office for the leadership and shopstewards to three years. We also resolved that problems should be taken to the NEC instead of workers always voting leadership out of positions. We changed the composition of congress, making it larger to broaden participation.

Bulletin: *How are you staffed and what are the main challenges regarding staffing?*

Witbooi: At head office we have the secretariat and four departments - finance, organising, administration and education. Our national co-ordinators include a national gender co-ordinator. Our education department comprises an education officer, a media officer, and an international relations officer. We want to employ a researcher.

We have nine offices in the nine provinces - each office has a full-time provincial organiser and a full-time provincial administrator. We have four branches - two in Gauteng and two in the Eastern Cape. In total we employ 38 people.

The major challenges relate to salaries and keeping people happy because you

have to pay decent salaries that will make them productive. Lack of discipline is no longer a problem because we have focused on what they should do and what is expected of them. Another challenge is empowering people and building capacity. We have embarked on a training programme and also have a system to support studies. We also offer staff medical aid (on a 50-50 basis), a housing allowance, a car allowance (for co-ordinators) and a provident fund which I think is the best one around.

Bulletin: *What campaigns are you undertaking?*

Witbooi: We participate in all COSATU campaigns. We have a campaign calling for transformation in the SAPS and correctional services. We have a recruitment campaign as well as our annual anti-crime campaign.

Bulletin: *What is your position on corruption?*

Witbooi: We are against corruption and we tell our members they must report corruption to us so we can report it to management. We have a problem with the anti-corruption units - they are part of the system. We support the Commissioner's position to disband specialist units. We ourselves have reported corruption about some specialist units and nothing has been done. There is corruption at a very high level. We need to deal with this level first in order to send a clear message that corruption will not be tolerated. If we do not do this, a person may say 'I see my boss is corrupt so can I be corrupt'.

Bulletin: *Many people cite escape figures as a problem regarding prisons. What is your view on this and how should correctional services be transformed?*

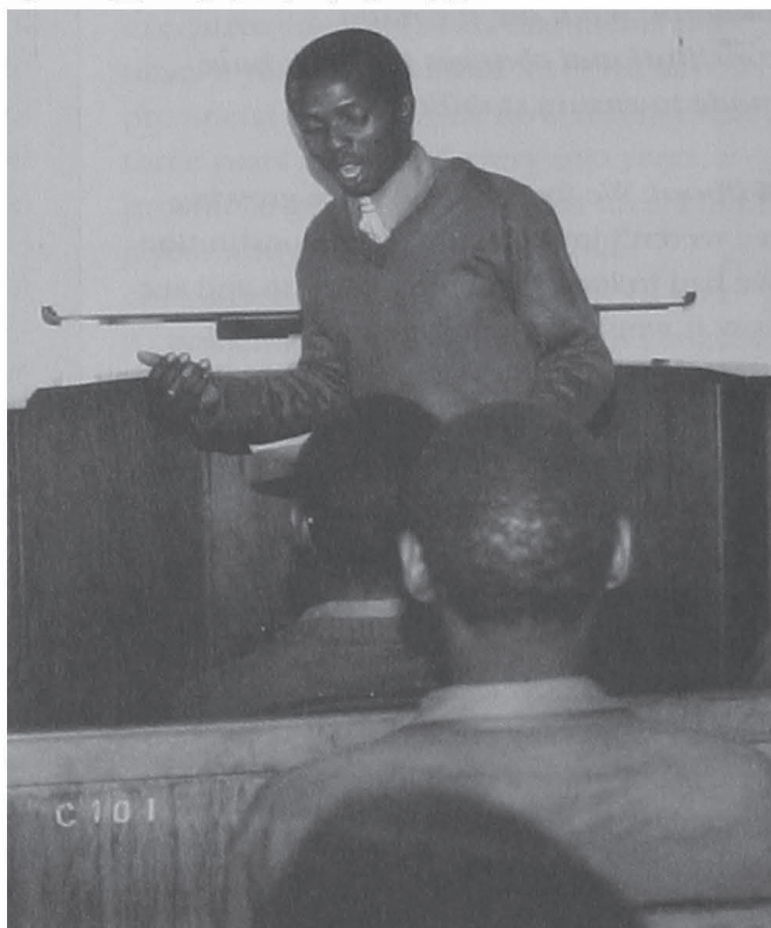
Witbooi: I do not agree that escapes should be the only measure used to determine the effectiveness of prisons. We also need to look at rehabilitation. Within prisons, more should be done about rehabilitation - but there is a shortage of social workers and psychologists.

We also need to address how to put people on supervision. We could put more people on supervision - take them out of the prison and let them do community work so that they do not sit idle under the sun. We should come up with programmes with the community - for example, repairing fences and cutting grass for the schools in the townships. Those on supervision could sleep at home and report for community work. This would also save the government money as they would sleep at home and have breakfast and supper at home.

Correctional services could then draw up a budget for giving them lunch and some money when they are doing community work. It is therefore not correct to build more prisons thinking that it will be the solution to crime. We also need to improve the country's social security system and invest in schools etc.

Bulletin: What is your background?

Witbooi: I am originally from the Eastern Cape and joined the organisation in 1990. I was first an assistant branch secretary in 1990, but was then dismissed after the strike. In 1993 I was elected as regional chairperson of the Border region and in 1994 I relinquished the position because I had no income. I was then appointed an organiser and was paid R1 000 per month. In 1995 I was elected provincial secretary and in 1998 I was elected general secretary.



POPCRU believes that prisoners must be treated fairly.

Bulletin: What is your message to employers?

Witbooi: We are in a new democratic dispensation. We have a new Constitution, a new LRA and other new relevant acts. If we can observe the acts as far as the rights of workers are concerned, I think we will be able to create harmony in the workplace which will lead to a more productive workforce.

Bulletin: What is your message to members?

Witbooi: Members must change their attitude and they must understand that as employees of the government it is expected of them to deserve what they earn. As such they must deliver proper services to all people of the country regardless of colour. ★