

# Power through publishing

## *SACCAWU and parental rights*

**S**ACCAWU has been in the forefront of the struggle for parental rights. In the 1980s and early 1990s the union won a host of agreements with some of South Africa's largest companies: Pick 'n Pay, OK Bazaars, Clicks, 3M and Diskom.

The Pick 'n Pay agreement of 1987 still stands out as a landmark in this field – 12 months of maternity leave with job guarantees. But many of those who played a leading role in those struggles have left the union. In light of this situation, there is the danger that these agreements remain pieces of paper, the contents of which remain a best kept secret from union members.

According to Patricia Appolis, SACCAWU's national gender co-ordinator, the situation became 'quite urgent as negotiators were nearly all male' and the very few women negotiators 'weren't necessarily gender sensitive'.

### Research and writing

To address this problem SACCAWU began a process of producing educational materials for negotiators and shopstewards in 1997.

As former SACCAWU negotiator Jeremy Daphne noted: 'Due to staff turnover, particularly after the first democratic elections there was a need to put SACCAWU's experiences down in writing.' The materials had two aims:

- ☐ to provide support for the arguments

*John Pape outlines how SACCAWU has built organisation and advanced parental rights by researching and producing publications on parental rights.*

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negotiators would have to make with employers;

- ☐ to promote general awareness within the union of parental rights as an essential element of the struggle for gender equality.

The union received funding from the Bernard van Leer Foundation and the South African Labour Development Trust (SALDT) to carry out this project. However, SACCAWU lacked the dedicated staff to produce the manual. In Appolis' words: 'When we strategised on how we were going to produce the manual we acknowledged that we did not have the capacity. We thought the best thing would be to work with a labour service organisation (LSO), but the process should be driven by the union.'

Daphne concurred, noting that production of the manual would be 'a process of empowerment of shopsteward negotiators as well'.

As a result, SACCAWU approached an

LSO, ILRIG, where Daphne was director. ILRIG and SACCAWU had a series of meetings and agreed on a process to produce the materials. The model was to be one of 'participatory research' where workers would be actively involved in each step of the process.

While such participatory approaches aim to promote democracy, they often get bogged down in an endless series of meetings that fail to take key decisions. The union had to work carefully to avoid such pitfalls.

### Building organisation

Appolis also saw the development of the materials as more than just a production process. She used the work on the publication as a way to bring together members of the gender structure and focus their work on a specific project. To this end, she decided to allocate responsibility for the project to one region: the Western Cape.

Despite these good intentions, people remained apprehensive about the project. Although the national leadership was supportive, the regional office bearers were not so keen. 'You had to convince them,' recalls present Western Cape gender co-ordinator Fihliwe Lusu.

Gender structure member Brenita Cloete says a typical response from male leaders was 'it's you guys again'. Jan Kotze, current chairperson in the Western Cape recalls similar attitudes. 'A woman would come and say: "I want you to have a gender committee." We would say "why do I need a gender committee? I've got an education committee, a finance committee..."

But the apprehension even extended to the members of the reference group. The first two designed groups failed to meet. Cloete: 'I was sceptical about a reference group and it was also held on a Saturday.'

By late 1997 the union finalised a plan for developing the manual and members like Cloete were 'converted': 'The first meeting went okay. I couldn't wait for the next meeting to take place. From there I really started encouraging people to participate in the gender structures.' Implementing the plan provided some surprises for reference group members and ILRIG researchers. Workers were now expected to go out and do research, not simply be part of a rubber stamping structure.

Lusu interviewed about 50 workers in a range of companies around the Western Cape. Her research became a good form of performance assessment for the union. She uncovered a number of companies where shopstewards did not even know there was an agreement about parental rights.

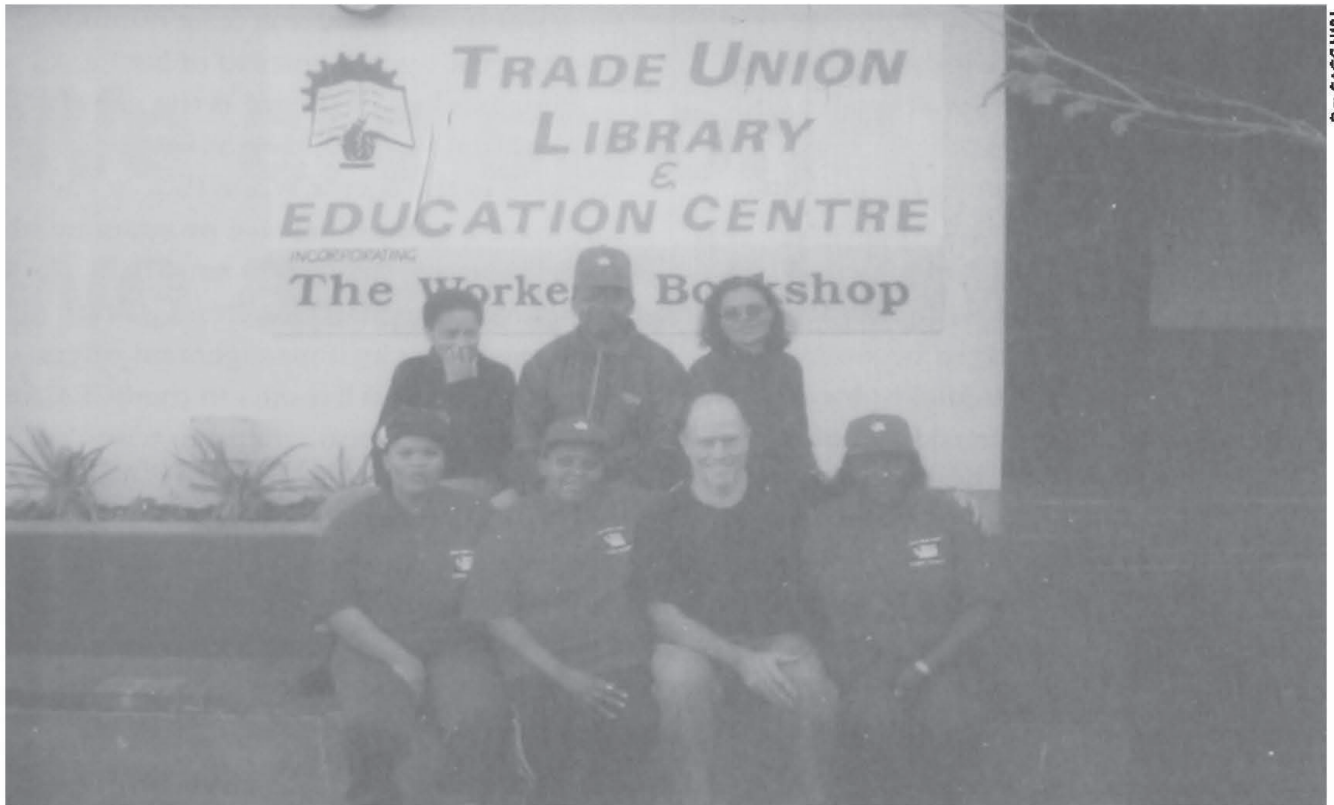
But the impact of pulling together the manual went far beyond simply gathering information. Rhoda Brazier, former Western Cape gender co-ordinator, also used the interviews as a process of encouraging workers to exercise their rights: 'One worker who was pregnant phoned the office and I called the worker in to be part of the interview.'

Moreover, the activity around the parental rights manual sparked a new round of debate within the union around gender issues.

### Manuals and booklets

Finally after nearly two years' work (and many meetings), a 134 page manual was produced. Six hundred copies were distributed to negotiators throughout the union. According to reference group members the manual impacted on both the workers and the bosses.

Manny Jacobs, a reference group member, said that before the manual 'the perception of men was that we must run this organisation. By educating this



PIC: SACCAWU

*SACCAWU reference group members and Ilrig researchers ensured a successful project.*

leadership the shift began – slowly the start was made.’ Kotze noted that the manual ‘made bosses aware that they need to make the changes in their own structures – like the chief executive officers here are all men.’

Then came the next phase of the project – producing a short popular booklet. While workers had taken an active part in researching the manual, most of the conceptualising and design was left to ILRIG researchers – Daphne and later Palesa Morudu.

But having overseen the manual, the reference group members took an even more active role from the outset with the booklet. In the initial brainstorming session, the reference group members completely reshaped the ILRIG researcher’s ideas about the structure and design of the booklet. Some members of the reference group even brought their own material to meetings to illustrate what they had in mind. As a result, the

booklet became much more interactive and had more lively material than the manual. The device of using fictional SACCAWU members as tour guides for the booklet made the information more accessible to workers.

Moreover, unlike the early stages of the manual, the plan to produce the booklet went like clockwork. Every meeting quorated, all deadlines were met. SACCAWU launched the booklet in Cape Town on South African Women’s Day, 2000. Since then over 9 000 copies have been distributed throughout SACCAWU structures as well as within other unions and NGOs.

### Changes

The process of producing these materials has done more than increase SACCAWU’s profile in the area of parental rights. The individuals involved in the process have been changed as well. Two reference group members, Lusu and Cloete have

become far more active union members as well as parental rights advocates. Lusu, an administrator, is now regional gender co-ordinator and is often called upon by other unions to speak on parental rights. Cloete is currently regional treasurer.

Apart from helping to empower women leaders, producing the booklet has also won over some men to becoming strong supporters of parental rights and gender equality. Kotze considers himself one of these: 'What will further the issue of gender in the union? If we want to be champions of gender we must put it high on the agenda ... you'll find that we put it on the last day and we're leaving. When we have a COSATU region there will be only two lines at the end of the report.'

## Challenges

The first challenge is to ensure that membership and officials engage with the publications: 'We might say we've done a very good job publishing all this, but are they really utilised to the fullest? Have the shopstewards and membership we have targeted to read the booklet really read it? Do they understand exactly what it means and do they extract areas that may assist them? How do we monitor to see that this has been a very successful exercise?' (Luise Thihe, first deputy president of SACCAWU)

Still, while the production of the manual and booklet is viewed as a success, many challenges around parental rights remain. In a union where the majority of members are women, most negotiators and leaders are men. At times this is reflected in the bargaining with employers. As Lusu observed 'negotiators are mostly men. When they come back they don't care about parental rights.'

So giving the negotiators a manual is a step, but more education and political pressure may be needed to get them to, as

Lusu put it, 'put gender at least number three on the agenda instead of last'.

A further key challenge is the gaps in the parental rights gains amongst different workers in the sector. While Pick 'n Pay may have a comprehensive programme of parental rights, workers in smaller companies often lag far behind - often they may be lucky if management offers them the minimal benefits in the BCEA. An additional gap is also emerging with the increasing casualisation in the retail sector. In companies like Woolworths and Shoprite, casuals are now the majority of the workforce. For the most part, SACCAWU has yet to succeed in winning casuals over to becoming loyal union members, let alone guaranteeing their parental rights.

Perhaps the last frontier to be conquered is child-care. Not a single company where SACCAWU organises has yet agreed to provide child-care facilities for their workers. With increasing casualisation this may remain a difficult aim to achieve.

In other companies forms of gender discrimination remain. Reference group member Manny Jacobs noted that in his company women who are on maternity leave do not get the pay increases until they return to work: 'This is an issue I feel strongly about.' Thihe noted what she called 'cultural differences': 'According to the bosses, the father should be a person who is married. We always have a problem with this.'

Ultimately the manual and the booklet, as well as the members of the reference group, are powerful tools to take up these challenges. But in an era of globalisation and casualisation, the struggle for parental rights will likely remain a contested area for some time to come. ★

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