

Pretoria municipal workers strike: NUPSW and SAMWU in conflict

A SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT in Pretoria reports on the recent municipal workers strike there, where the NACTU-affiliated National Union of Public Sector Workers (NUPSW) and COSATU's SA Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU) are competing for the allegiance of the workers.

On 4 April Pretoria's municipal workers embarked on their first industrial action in recent years demanding higher wages, and protesting against the divisive tactics of the Pretoria City Council (PCC). The action was marked by strong rivalry between the Union of Pretoria Municipal Workers (UPMW), which is being incorporated into SAMWU, and the NUPSW. The UPMW, which claimed 5 050 members before the strike, complains that its one-day protest was turned into a two-week strike by the NUPSW, which 'hijacked' and 'intimidated' the workers. The NUPSW, which claimed 3 500 of the 7 500-strong PCC workforce before

the strike, now claims that up to 6 000 workers have become members, as a result of 'dissatisfaction' with SAMWU and the UPMW.

UPMW/SAMWU: organising in Pretoria

How, in the conservative South African capital with its racist and anti-worker municipality, did workers begin to organise? In the discredited workers' liaison committee, explained Paul Sedutla, a veteran of the committee and currently SAMWU's deputy treasurer in Pretoria. Through a process of taking up individual workers' grievances with management and spreading

the message of trade unions, the UPMW emerged in 1983.

Three workers are said to have spearheaded the campaign against bad working conditions, starvation wages, unfair labour practices and intimidation of workers by white supervisors, said Solly Kekane, a shop steward. The fledgling union established a strong base when it signed up workers living in the municipality's Mamelodi hostel. A recognition agreement was clinched with the PCC in December 1985.

Merging with SAMWU

UPMW claimed about 5 600 members at the time of recognition in 1985, which also coincided with the national launch of COSATU. The

question of affiliation to the national federation was soon raised.

There were initial misgivings about whether the union, which had since then registered, should ally itself with COSATU or NACTU, or stay independent. Two UPMW office-bearers went to Cape Town in 1987 to attend early talks on forging a single national municipal workers' union, said SAMWU organiser Ngobeni. SAMWU was launched as a COSATU affiliate in November 1987. The UPMW members backed SAMWU's position as a non-racial organisation with similar policies to COSATU, and supported the African National Congress as a political party.

UPMW workers have been joining SAMWU ever since it started recruiting in Pretoria. The UPMW still exists in name, but SAMWU has applied for verification of scope to organise in the Northern Transvaal. This will enable them to approach the city council for recognition. If SAMWU is recognised UPMW will disband. SAMWU's Ngobeni claims all UPMW members belong to SAMWU.

SAMWU presence limited to Pretoria

But besides Pretoria, where UPMW/SAMWU claims to represent about 80% of the council workforce, SAMWU has only managed to establish a marginal presence in other Northern Transvaal

towns. SAMWU is still busy organising municipal workers in Brits, Rustenburg, Zeerust, Thabazimbi, Ellsras, Potgietersrus, Pietersburg, Naboomspruit, Phalaborwa, Nelspruit and the Mamelodi Town Council, where shop stewards have started attending COSATU local meetings. About 400 of the Transvaal Provincial Administration's workforce of 400 to 600 have also been signed up by SAMWU.



The union has shop stewards in all 43 departments in the PCC and tries to sustain a ratio of two shopstewards per 100 workers. SAMWU representatives serve on the Pretoria COSATU shopstewards' local and the union's treasurer, Sam Ngele, holds the same position in COSATU's Northern Transvaal REC. It plays an active part in COSATU's anti-privatisation and Workers' Charter campaigns.

On the surface, UPMW appears to enjoy all the hamstrung rights of a recognised public sector union, but at the same time the PCC has drawn on the Supreme Court, the police and its own by-laws to prevent or break up

at least two public demonstrations of worker solidarity in the city this year.

Marches banned

A march against privatisation in March by public sector workers, joined by their comrades from other sectors in COSATU's Northern Transvaal Region, was disrupted by police (the NUPSW did not take part in the march, because it claims that it was not invited to do so by COSATU's public sector affiliates). Thirty-nine workers, many with bleeding wounds, were arrested after being baton-charged, tear-gassed and bitten by police dogs while peacefully dispersing on police orders.

The PCC banned the march on the grounds that it would disrupt traffic and posed a potential danger to people and property. It also said that the march would interfere with end-of-month shopping. The Pretoria City magistrate said at the time he was obliged to ban the march because of the council's decision.

A month later, the PCC turned to the Supreme Court to get an order preventing a march supporting and popularising the call for a Workers' Charter.

Not only was the interdict granted, but on 28 April the police staged a huge show of force near the COSATU offices in Brown Street, in an apparent attempt to intimidate the workers. As SAMWU organiser, Walter Theledi, remarked: "Pretoria is the

capital city of South Africa, here apartheid is directly practical.....

"The city council is trying to satisfy the far right. Why is the Saambou Street Mile allowed to be run in the morning, but workers can't march? A march and a race will always disrupt. We just want to be able to march to air our views", he said.

Divisive tactics

The city council has also employed other tactics to divide and disorganise UPMW members. The council has used its own staff regulations to transfer workers, and especially shop stewards, from one department and even area to another, said Thomas Ngobeni. This damages organisation and confuses members, he said.

SAMWU has tried to challenge this divisive practice. But, beside the council's heavy-handed tactics, inter-union rivalry has also bugged efforts to weld the council workforce into a united, democratic union.

NUPSW organises in Pretoria

NUPSW is a NACTU affiliate, and has been organising municipal workers in Pretoria since mid-1987. When it initially penetrated the PCC workforce, NUPSW drew on workers' dissatisfaction with UPMW, which has a closed-shop agreement with the PCC.

"Former UPMW shop stewards approached NUPSW,

citing worker dissatisfaction with that union. They said UPMW was not representing the workers and it merely played the role of a trade union while going through the motions of procedures laid down by the city council," says Mankoto Lesufi, NUPSW's regional organiser.

The closed-shop is one problem, he claims. Some unpopular UPMW officials were taken 'ready-made' into SAMWU structures, as was



the 'ready-made' UPMW membership.

"Workers are disillusioned with UPMW. When UPMW established links with SAMWU, workers saw SAMWU selling them out. They see the same officials in SAMWU. The same people (UPMW officials) were seen talking to the city council on the workers' mandate, but were unable to achieve anything," says Lesufi.

NUPSW has recognition agreements with the Phalaborwa and Duiwelskloof municipalities in the Far Northern Transvaal, and besides Pretoria, is recruiting members in Verwoerdburg, the Akasia town council (near Pretoria), Warmbaths,

Pietersburg and Potgietersrus.

The union has about 90 shopstewards in the Pretoria City Council and is active in the local NACTU structures, says Lesufi.

Organising workers not easy

However, organising the workers was not that easy, NUPSW found. Firstly, there was the closed-shop to deal with. A major hindrance discouraging the workers from changing union allegiance was a funeral scheme which workers were loath to leave for fear of losing their benefits. If workers resigned from UPMW and cancelled their monthly R1 stop orders, they automatically dropped out of the funeral scheme. Workers were reluctant to resign because of this, but eventually opted for dual union membership, Lesufi says.

Hostile management

Secondly, NUPSW faced a hostile management which refused to grant it stop order facilities and used delaying tactics to meet union representatives. "The city council promoted UPMW at our expense," Lesufi says.

NUPSW approached the city council for recognition talks in 1988, but the council argued that NUPSW did not have the required 50% plus one to qualify for recognition. The union was prepared to hold a second meeting with the city council to prove its membership figures, but this was refused, according to Lesufi.

By early this year, NUPSW switched to a different tactic. Instead of approaching management as a union, it got shop stewards organised into a NUPSW-supporting branch executive committee (BEC) to deal with the bosses.

Workers at the PCC took action against the council on 4 April. It was intended as a one-day protest, says SAMWU, but the NUPSW disputes this, saying the workers had decided that a strike was more appropriate.

The strike: SAMWU's version of events

SAMWU planned a one-day sit-in on 4 April as a protest against delays in salary and wage talks (*Pretoria News* 4/4/90). Workers, earning a monthly minimum of R560 after an 1 April increase, demanded R1 000 as a starting living wage.

While the council claims the workers were on strike, SAMWU organisers said the action was a one-day protest. However, what was meant to be a disciplined display of worker unity in support of demands, turned into an unplanned and disorganised two-week stoppage. The reason for this, said Ngobeni, was the intervention in the dispute by the NUPSW.

NUPSW, which was reported by *Pretoria News* to have about 1 000 followers in Pretoria, "foresaw that SAMWU was going to win its demands, and maybe

NUPSW thought they would lose support because of SAMWU's success", said Ngobeni. The upshot was that NUPSW members persuaded their counterparts in UPMW to extend the sit-in into a protracted wage strike. Accusations of intimidation were made against NUPSW.

While about 5 500 workers sustained the stoppage, the city council hired white scabs and holidaying schoolboys to clean the city's



streets and remove rubbish in some suburbs. The school-boy scabs were paid R7 an hour, compared to the roughly R3,50 earned on average by the lowest paid workers.

NUPSW 'misled' workers

SAMWU organiser Walter Theledi asserted that, in any case, workers were "ignorant" and could be "hijacked" by "misleading" claims from NUPSW. NUPSW members, claimed Ngobeni, had also prevented SAMWU members in Verwoerdburg from holding a report-back on wage negotiations. This had obliged SAMWU to change the venue and date of the meeting to Medunsa in mid-May.

Said Ngobeni, "We are not trying to criticise or expose them. We are looking for the reality of freedom of association. We don't have a right to say that a worker cannot join another union, but there must not be intimidation and victimisation." SAMWU and NUPSW do not have formal contact, he said.

The workers stayed on strike for two weeks, until a threatened interdict and out-of-court settlement between SAMWU and the PCC ended the stoppage on April 17. NUPSW, cited as a respondent with SAMWU, failed to appear in court.

Further wage talks were scheduled and took place between the council and UPMW/SAMWU. There has been no movement on either side, but there is no deadlock. The two parties are expected to meet again, according to Ngobeni.

The union believes that the workers have confidence in SAMWU's ability to unite them into a single national union of municipal workers.

The strike: NUPSW's version of events

In January, the BEC approached the council management with a proposal for a R900 minimum monthly wage and 20% across-the-board increase. It also demanded the recognition of NUPSW. Taking its time to meet the BEC, the municipality again ruled out talks,

arguing that NUPSW was not recognised, according to Lesufi. In April workers responded with a strike.

The ensuing confusion in worker ranks and cooling of the relationship between NUPSW and SAMWU can be laid at the door of two unions submitting separate demands on behalf of the same workers, says Lesufi. SAMWU, he says, had tabled their wage proposal to the PCC on April 3, demanding a R1 000 minimum wage.

SAMWU members downed tools on April 4, not to stage a one day sit-in, as claimed by SAMWU, according to Lesufi, but to embark on a strike. NUPSW, which had held several general meetings with its members beforehand to discuss - and agree on - a strike in support of their own demands, was approached by SAMWU to support its members, says Lesufi.

"The NUPSW BEC agreed to this, and workers downed tools in support of two separate sets of demands. We were prepared to strike to support SAMWU. At the same time we saw SAMWU members as supporting our members. The BEC did not want workers divided and decided to engage in action the same day."

The city council and SAMWU met on the same day the stoppage started, with the NUPSW BEC being invited to attend the talks as observers by the SAMWU negotiating committee.

Talks ended with the PCC

quoting a no-strike clause in its recognition agreement with SAMWU, and accusing SAMWU of being in breach of agreement, says Lesufi. SAMWU was ordered to call off the strike and to get its members back to work.

The parties, excluding the NUPSW BEC, agreed to further wage talks once the workers resumed work. Both unions returned to their members the same day to report back, with the NUPSW BEC



telling its supporters that the council still refused to talk to the union. NUPSW members voted to stay on strike until their demands were met.

Workers 'reject' SAMWU report-back

"SAMWU had problems in reporting back. Both unions were negotiating about money. Workers did not understand why SAMWU had decided to go back if the council did not touch the issue of money. SAMWU had a problem with its own members," says Lesufi. Ultimately, he claims, SAMWU was not in a position of control - the workers were.

The strike lasted until 7 April, when both unions agreed to call off the stop-

page in the face of a threatened interdict. NUPSW intended challenging the injunction, but Lesufi was reported at that time as saying that the union was not given the opportunity to challenge the matter in court.

Answering to SAMWU charges that NUPSW disrupted a SAMWU meeting in Verwoerdburg recently, Lesufi says that NUPSW members did participate in the meeting and could, by asking certain questions, have caused a disturbance. "Workers have a right to ask questions. We did not disrupt the meeting, though."

Responding to SAMWU's accusation that its members were intimidated into continuing the strike, Lesufi says this was possible, but workers themselves had rejected the SAMWU report-back and favoured continuing the stoppage. Also, he adds, if the Supreme Court heard that 7 500 workers were to be interdicted and NUPSW had only 1 000 members in the PCC, as claimed in the press, "how could 1 000 workers intimidated 6 000?"

Workers 'flocking' to join NUPSW

"SAMWU could have represented the larger proportion of the workers before the strike, but since then they have been flocking to us," he says.

The NUPSW claims its membership at the Pretoria City Council (PCC) leapt from an estimated 3 500 workers to 6 000, out of the total

workforce of 7 500. The union believes it can oust SAMWU as the representative union when it meets the PCC in late June to verify its membership figures.

Despite these differences, however, Lesufi sees the two unions as sharing the right to freedom of association and believing that the majority is the one to be recognised. "We don't believe in destroying our relationship or taking their members. We would like to sit down with SAMWU to thrash out these issues," he says.

Assessment

Workers in the PCC are faced with having to choose between three different trade unions - the NUPSW, SAMWU and UPMW.

While SAMWU is in the process of absorbing the UPMW into its structures, the latter is still a separate union with a 'sweetheart' reputation. SAMWU and the NUPSW, on the other hand, are both progressive unions, in that they seek to advance working class control and democracy.

However, they follow different political traditions. SAMWU, as a COSATU affiliate, is aligned to the ANC tradition of non-racialism, while NUPSW, through its NACTU affiliation, is in the Africanist/black consciousness camp. Both unions in Pretoria have been relying on workers' dissatisfaction with the relatively tame and ineffective UPMW to, in

different ways, draw members into their respective ranks.

Both unions claim to have organised the majority of PCC workers, although only SAMWU is on the verge of achieving recognition. The city council negotiates with SAMWU on the basis of its incorporative policy towards the almost defunct but still-recognised UPMW. This is a *de facto* acceptance of SAMWU's representativity.



NUPSW, on the other hand, has failed to prove its claimed majority. Until it does so, it cannot expect to be recognised by the council.

Mass support for the strike

The recent strike, however, seems to have undermined SAMWU's claims to be the representatives of PCC workers. While it is possible that intimidation played a role, it appears that the strike had mass support. Whether it was intended or not, the strike showed that the PCC workers were willing to back their wage demands with a protracted and militant withdrawal of their labour power. This was regardless of whether these demands were

forwarded by SAMWU or the NUPSW.

The optimistic view is that the PCC workers were militant, prepared to risk strike action and clearly rejected 'sweetheart' unionism. The pessimistic view is that organisation is in disarray, with neither SAMWU nor NUPSW able to reveal the exact extent of their support.

March separately, strike together

While it seems likely that, as a result of the strike, the NUPSW has encroached on SAMWU's support, without accurate and objective assessments of worker support, the true situation cannot be established. Inter-union competition, if it leads to unsubstantiated claims, recrimination and confusion amongst workers, will only benefit the employers and the state.

Nevertheless, whichever union in the end manages to prove that it has the support of the majority, workers should still have the right to choose their own representatives. This principles should apply even if it means that separate organisations should coexist. Minority representatives should have the right to build support through persuasion and example. Only this democratic process will allow workers to march separately and strike together, as a united, self-conscious force. ☆