



Challenges for trade union leaders

A profile of THULAS NXESI,
General Secretary of the
South African Democratic
Teachers Union.
THULAS NXESI speaks to
LUCI NYEMBE.

Introduction

The SA Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU) was launched in Johannesburg on 6 October 1990. In the three and a half years of its existence, it has organised 101 000 teachers in the central public service and the homeland public services and seen its members through a major national wage strike. It has members in all the homelands including KwaZulu, Ciskei and Bophuthatswana. However, the authorities have been obstinate and have refused to grant the union recognition, despite numerous attempts at negotiation. It has recently affiliated to COSATU.

Heavy leadership loss to the election process

1994 is a particularly critical time for SADTU. Like in many trade unions, senior union officials have gone into government. The General Secretary and President are both on the ANC's national list, and key regional leaders including the chairpersons of the Northern Cape, Western Transvaal and the Eastern Cape and the Transkei regional secretary are on various regional lists. The Northern Transvaal, one of SADTU's most vibrant regions, has lost both their chairperson and regional secretary. Almost half the National Executive Committee is on various ANC national and regional lists.

It is at this time that Thulas Nxesi, a teacher with many years experience, takes over as General Secretary of SADTU. Cde Thulas is the former secretary of the National Education Union of South Africa (NEUSA), one of the first radical teacher organisations in the country. Formed around 1983, NEUSA played an active role in the teacher unity talks and the establishment of SADTU. It was banned in the late 1980s. Cde Thulas was very active in organising teachers and developing ideas around "alternative models for education". He was elected the first assistant General Secretary of SADTU at its Inaugural Congress and on 1 March 1994, the SADTU National Council elected him as its General Secretary.

Rebuilding leadership

Thulas is under no illusions about the difficulties facing the new union leadership during the early days of the new democracy. In fact, SADTU is still in the process of electing members to fill the vacant positions. Thulas argues that there has been a lack of seriousness about developing worker leadership, particularly second layer leadership, and that this has been a weakness of the democratic movement as a whole. In this context, mobilising people for the election lists has contributed to a disintegration of organisation at the top and many unions and other organisations are still in the process of rebuilding.

Asked why he did not accept nomination



to the election lists, Thulas says that this was both a personal and organisational decision. He says that comrades will have to emerge and take up leadership of the organisation and that new leadership is vital at the regional level. SADTU has

developed a proposal for a training programme whereby SADTU hopes to develop its new cadre of worker leaders. Thulas says that the training programme will be very practical – setting up a local office, handling grievances, reporting, meeting procedure, handling conflict, advocating rights, negotiations skills:

“We launch branches, elect people and then they don’t know what to do, how to represent teachers, how to report back. Teachers do not have the necessary leadership skills. They have been suppressed and prevented from leading in the past. The majority of teachers are women, but the majority of stewards are men. Training is needed to change this balance.”

Thulas argues that training must enable teachers to become a resource in developing ideas around education policy, alternative teaching methods, professional development

programmes. The union will initiate such programmes as a contribution to the process of reconstruction and development.

“To contribute to reconstruction and development, SADTU needs strong organisation at national and grassroots level. To implement a new education system will require strong union leadership in the schools. Young people feel that education is meaningless because of the twin problems of poor education and unemployment. Education itself has to be reconstructed, teacher education must be revisited. We must change attitudes and perceptions among teachers that they should gain further degrees merely to get higher incomes. Higher incomes should be an incentive for improving teaching methods and getting higher pass rates. The union will be instrumental in this process of education renewal. The demand for appropriate training programmes must be seen to advance the interests of teachers, union members and students, and must qualify teachers for effectively higher incomes.”

Affirmative action

“Women must be empowered to participate in professional development programmes. We must build confidence. There must be affirmative action in the union movement to maximise the participation of women. This should not be just words – each union should have a written policy on affirmative action in its ranks.

Affirmative action in schools should lead to a replacement of puppet principals and heads of department. Promotion should be on the basis of skill and performance. We expect that the Reconstruction and Development Programme of a new government would forge greater co-operation between teachers and principals than in the past. However, the principal is the authority representing government policy at the school level, so there would still be a tension between him/her and members of the union. Our view is that principals should not be members of the union and members promoted to those posts would have to resign their union membership.

The other view is that principals are also

employees of the department, i.e. they don't have any policy-making powers. This is one tension within SADTU.

Affirmative action will give SADTU members equal opportunity to become part of management and we have no problem with this. Everybody should be given an equal chance for promotion. Opportunities should be created for women who have the potential. Union membership should not prevent people from taking those life chances. In fact, in developing its views on affirmative action, the union should fight for women to be trained to occupy management posts, even if they can then no longer be union members. This is necessary because we are talking about broader education issues as well as union issues."

Strikes

The union has two concerns: the labour rights and members and education as a public interest issue. The union would like to see the interest of teachers, unions, parents and government converge as far as possible in relation to these issues.

A question we will have to confront is the exercise of the right to strike. Under the old administration, things were relatively clear. We went on strike for better conditions for teachers and students. Under the new regime things will be more complicated. Our members have not been introduced to the key concept of trade unionism – the balancing of rights and responsibilities. In the past we could blame the government. What do we do under a democratic government?

We need to review our demands. While stressing the responsibility of government to provide resources to education, including better wages, we must also stress the responsibility of teachers to provide a good educational service. We need to create consultative structures of teachers, students and parents to deal with the tensions between rights and responsibilities that will inevitably arise. If there is mechanism to deal with disputes, we will see less disruptions.

The culture of learning and teaching must be revived. This will take time. We need to

embark on processes to revive teaching – setting targets, monitoring progress, measuring performance. Things have deteriorated to such an extent that we need to address problems of anti-social behaviour – assault, carrying of dangerous weapons, non-return of text books. There should be grievance procedures for both teachers and students. This will help to reduce the tensions which lead to violence.

Teachers must have the right to strike. But teachers, unions, parents, students and government must work together to resolve problems before they lead to this end.

This can allow for a reconciliation of different views. If the government was not open to hearing our views on certain matters, we would reserve the right to take action. We can't stand at a distance and say the government should encourage participation. We must take the initiative and we may also need to contribute materially to the functioning of such structures.

Another change which will affect education and bargaining is the establishment of provinces. Since the delivery of education will be a provincial matter, it is likely that there will be a greater emphasis on collective bargaining as well as on policy matters at the provincial level. This will compel the union to strengthen its structures at the provincial level and not rely on the national level for bargaining.

In short, the challenge is to transform our organisational activities from a confrontational style to a social partnership in the arena of education, without neglecting the rights and interests of our members. One thing is clear, if the government tramples on our rights, we will confront it.

Another challenge is the existence of racial tensions between teachers' organisations. The challenge is how to make our organisations truly non-racial. The continuing racial segregation in schools does not help. Tensions and suspicions still surface. We must come up with a plan for integrating schools in a more radical way than the present system, where integration depends on what individual families can afford." ✧