

Profile

Connie September, National Treasurer and vice chair-person of the Western Cape region of SACTWU

Interviewed by HOWARD GABRIELS

Connie September is 32 years old. She was elected as National Treasurer of SACTWU in 1990. She grew up in Grassy Park, Cape Town. She was elected as a shop steward at Rex Trueform in 1988. In 1989 she was elected Vice Chairperson of the Western Cape region of SACTWU.

Forming years

I was born in Grassy Park. In Seventh Avenue where I grew up, it was a very close community. Your neighbours were almost part of your family and everyone belonged to the same church. We stayed in a very big house, together with five families. I lived there until I finished standard eight. We then moved to Lotus River which was a big change. It is an area controlled by the Divisional Council. There we were confronted with the whole problem of gangsterism which was new for us. It was in that road that my political awareness started.

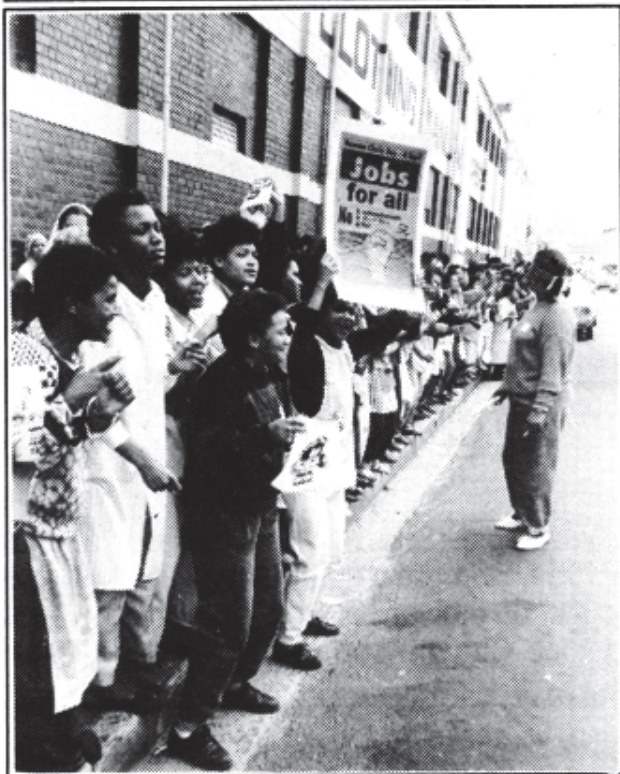
My involvement started with a very simple issue. In our area most of the houses did not have electricity. The Civic Association was started in our area, because of the lack of electricity and other problems in the community. I was asked by a woman in our street to come along to a civic meeting, after which I attended a lot of meetings.

Work history

In 1980 I started to work at Rex Trueform. At first I was working in the factory. I had to check the

production targets that the machinists produced each 30 minutes. I was irritated by my job because it seemed that workers did not resent the system, but the person. After a year I approached management for another job. I was then moved to the warehouse where I am still working. I am dealing with customers who buy a specific range of very expensive clothing.

In 1980 I did not know a thing about the union. I did not even realise that subscriptions were deducted from my wages. My trade union consciousness started in 1983 when I attended the AGM of the community newspaper, Grassroots. A host of organisations, including trade unions, were present. I listened to the trade unionists talking and I realised that we have something like that at work. Later in 1983 I found out more about the trade union at our factory. I started to get angry with the trade union because I couldn't see what they were doing. I did not learn anything from them – for example, I did not know what wage negotiations were all about. In that period people got hired and



SACTWU protest in a human chain in Cape Town in September

Photo: Labour Bulletin

fired without question, even though there was a trade union. There was no such thing as a board of inquiry as we have today. There were shop stewards, however, in my view, who just became targets of the workers.

After the UDF was launched, a few of us came together to launch the Clothing Workers Union (CLOWU). Our priority was to organise workers into CLOWU as an opposition to GWU. We started at a number of clothing factories. I think CLOWU gained a lot of respect at that time and started to make workers aware of how to take up issues and how to fight for the rights of workers. In my view they were fairly successful.

In the end CLOWU did not succeed in making a complete breakthrough, but it was successful in conscientising workers and making them aware of what a trade union is. It planted the good seeds in a lot of us who were involved in CLOWU. But the union did not gain recognition in any company, so workers had no experience of how a union could succeed. Another problem was that CLOWU became very political at that time because of the situation. This was a problem in an industry where politics was completely foreign to workers.

When the Garment and Allied Workers' Union (GAWU) was formed in 1987, I was

still active in CLOWU. My view at that stage was to watch and see if GAWU was moving towards what I would call a proper trade union. The real changes only started in 1988 when we went on strike at Rex Trueform. The strike was over wages. It was a turning point at Rex and also the clothing industry. The strike was a victory.

The changes in the union were reflected in the manner in which the union conducted itself on the factory floor. There was a rise in the militancy of workers who were beginning to recognise they do have rights and they could fight for them. The workers realised that they do have a support base from the union. After the strike in June 1988 I was elected as a shop steward in my department, even though I was very reluctant at that point to hold such a position.

However, once I was elected, the task I set for myself was to transform the shop stewards' committee, so that it would function properly. In this way, we would be able to take up workers' problems vigorously. Soon after that, the three plants of Rex were brought together and operated as one unit. About six months later I was elected as secretary of the committee. Management now also realised that there was a committee that they should respect.

Merger with clothing and textile union, ACTWUSA

I was one of the representatives of GAWU on the merger committee. It was shortly after GAWU was formed and was still in the process of transformation. It was still busy with an education programme for the shop stewards. The workers were beginning to feel comfortable with the idea that they had a union called GAWU. But a lot of fears emerged amongst us: will we still be the same union, are we being taken over, benefits, leadership etc. It was a painful period, because there were two big unions each with their own way of operating and traditions.

The merger strengthened the workers. We could speak with a bigger voice. Besides all the problems we had, the one idea that stood out all the time was the concept of UNITY.

In 1989 I became the chair of the Salt River local and in October 1989 I was elected the Vice chair of the Western Cape region of the new South African Clothing and Textile Workers' Union (SACTWU).

Political changes.

A lot of changes took place in 1990. Workers and the union itself were confronted with a whole new politics. The unbanning of political organisations had a great impact – workers suddenly started to speak about the ANC which was a foreign thing in our industry. The shop stewards raised questions about the future of workers in this country. For example, how are the rights of workers going to be guaranteed in a future SA. There were a lot of debates. SACTWU participated very vigorously in the Workers Charter Campaign. This campaign raised a lot of debates and therefore the consciousness of workers.

Two hats.

SACTWU's position on holding office in two organisations is that one should not simultaneously hold leadership positions in the trade union and in a political organisation. The trade union should strive to maintain its independence. From a practical point of view, it would be difficult for one to serve the members well if one held two positions.

My understanding of trade union independence is that a trade union would democratically take its own decisions; it would draw up its own constitution; it would abide by the terms of its own constitution; it would determine its own direction. Therefore even if a union or union federation is in conflict with a political party sympathetic to it, it must convince the political party of the reasons why it holds a particular view, and not simply abandon that view.

Clothing

In the Western Cape the clothing industry is the biggest. 85% of the workers are women. Even though it is the biggest industry, it was a silent giant for a long time. Nonetheless we made a big breakthrough in wages and a lot of other changes began to take place at the different plants. The days of sweatshops started to disappear.

Women

It is very difficult for me as a woman to be involved in the union. I have responsibilities at home. I've got a daughter that needs the comfort and attention of a parent. There are many tasks and responsibilities that rest on one's shoulders. It is a bit easier for me because I have a lot of support from my family. But



male chauvinism is a big problem. The concept of women leaders is not understood and respected in our society, especially by men. The union took up the issue of women in all our structures. Before our leadership was dominated by males. Our congress in 1991 adopted a resolution, which said that we would not establish separate structures as we believe that the problem of women's oppression is an issue for both male and female. In most of our structures, women are now taking leadership positions. As an organisation we are now addressing the question of women in a practical manner.

Major challenges for SACTWU

Retrenchments, short time and factory closures are amongst the most serious challenges facing SACTWU. The three sectors viz. clothing, textiles and leather need to restructure themselves. The other important point for the union is the establishment of national industrial councils in clothing and textiles. Politically, the future of workers and the shape of the future government, which must of course benefit workers and the whole society is another challenge facing the union. The unions also have a strong and important role to play in shaping the future economy of our country. ☆