

Raising the volume of workers' voices

Fighting for the airwaves

Workers World Media Productions has worked hard to ensure that labour issues and workers' voices get aired on the radio. **Erna Curry** talks about the difficulty of competing with high paying government and commercial players for access to the airwaves and of an exciting new partnership to ensure that community and labour radio is strengthened.

Bonga Ngwane, a National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) organiser in Durban recalls applying to the Labour Community Radio Project (LCRP) on a voluntary basis: "... because it had to do with the working class struggle, which has been my passion ever since I can remember. The prospect of my voice over the radio and being able to reach thousands of listeners within a minute was exciting."

Ngwane has been the labour host of the Workers World Media Productions (WWMP) labour show at Imbokodo FM in Durban for over four years. Imbokodo FM is one of the 40 community radio stations, across the country that partner with

WWMP in the LCRP.

In 1997 the LCRP piloted a series of pre-recorded workers' programmes on Bush Radio in Cape Town. It was well received and the activists involved decided to take the project further and in 2002 a pilot was launched. WWMP invited about 40 community radio stations to partner for a six month season of labour shows annually. The community radio stations were chosen on the basis of reaching working class communities in urban, peri-urban and rural communities. The radio stations had to use English, isiXhosa, isiZulu, Afrikaans and Sesotho as one of their official broadcasting languages. WWMP chose these languages because they

are the most used and understood in all provinces.

The aim of the LCRP is to develop a participatory labour media movement that is skilled in using radio as a tool for awareness raising and organising on labour and socio-economic-political issues. But why is this necessary?

Since democracy in 1994 the labour movement has faced a number of challenges. Privatisation as part of the neoliberal Gear (Growth, Employment and Redistribution) strategy has led to job losses, increased unemployment and casualisation. The volume of the voice of labour, which was high in community and mainstream media during the liberation struggle, has been turned down. Many mainstream newspapers at the time had dedicated labour reporters and labour columns, but this is no longer the case. Trade unions used to place great importance on the work of their media and cultural desks. In recent times however, many unions have phased these out.

At the same time mainstream media like newspapers, television and radio have become consolidated in the hands of corporate monopolies (see *SALB* 31.4). This monopoly ignores

WWMP



NUMSA delegates attend a WWMP orientation and training programme in Johannesburg, March 2006



Radio producer Erna Curry interviews Moeneeb Josephs of Ajax CT for a community radio feature on soccer players



Bonga Ngwane interviews Maskandi celebrity Phuzekhemisi

the struggles of poor working class communities for better lives or it portrays them as negative and destructive to nation building.

The role of community radio is to unearth these democratic grassroots independent voices in communities. Community radio stations serve local communities' interests in a range of areas and in order to get and keep a license, they need to reflect the voices of communities in their programming. This means, for example, producing programmes around the interests of women, youth and workers. Community radios are important for the development of democracy and the magic and power of radio is that it is accessible to most working class people, in their mother tongue.

LCRP PROGRAMMES

Using radio for workers' education is essential in a country where only 6% of workers have access to the Internet. The LCRP produces weekly prerecorded programmes to support labour shows in the chosen five languages. An eight minute radio feature, five minute labour news and an HIV/AIDS feature of four minutes is also sent to the stations.

Ngwane, for example, uses the weekly prerecorded isiZulu programmes to produce his labour show. He deals with a topic like 'Vulnerable Workers - Street Vendors' by focusing on what workers experience in the community of Durban. He believes that, "There are definitely benefits even for non-union and ordinary workers as well, which

results in numerous calls for labour advice."

The labour show season begins around Mayday annually. The two labour hosts, a trade unionist from the area and another from the community radio, work as a team and use the LCRP material to present a localised one-hour live labour show in the language of their area. These labour hosts over the nine years of LCRP's existence have undergone regional and national training in radio and labour issues. Labour hosts learn from each other, but also develop a network of relationships with the community and the labour movement in the area they broadcast to.

Sharon McKinnon has been part of the LCRP since she was nominated by Numsa in 2004. She comments, "I heard about the project but I never thought that I could be involved in radio." She applied and was selected from a pool of highly skilled trade unionists to attend the radio training. "I was a bit worried about being accepted at a Muslim community radio station," she recalls. However Radio 786 made her feel part of its family style of operating and she built up good relationships with colleagues there, especially the technicians with whom labour hosts work closely. Shanaaz Gool-Hammit, station manager of Radio 786, will work with any committed radio hosts who produce programming as long as they meet listeners' needs.

But this scenario is not the trend in community radio stations across South Africa. Community radio is

under threat. Community stations, especially in poor areas, compromise community participation in order to sustain their stations by favouring corporate and government access to airwaves because they pay well.

FIGHTING FOR ACCESS

In a meeting between WWMMP, the National Community Radio Forum (NCRF) and station managers from Gauteng, station managers said that they saw the relevance and importance of labour programmes. They explained however that insurance companies, for example, are willing to pay huge amounts for access to airwaves to sell funeral policies. This means that if they are faced with a choice between the labour show and paid airtime, the choice is a difficult one. Community radio stations are subject to the same running costs as commercial stations. However, they are run mostly by volunteers who are committed to serving their communities, but are often exploited.

In this climate labour hosts become ambassadors at a local level to keeping the volume up on workers' issues. But the challenges faced by radio stations affect the ability of labour hosts to deliver labour shows. They have to produce the shows, which involves phoning and faxing to secure live guests, writing scripts, setting up phone interviews and travelling long distances to the radio stations to present the shows.

Hongkong O tsetseng from the



Sharon McKinnon films speakers at an event at Community House in Salt River, Cape Town

Communication Workers' Union (CWU) has been a labour host at Vaaltar FM in Taung since 2004. This year the labour show was suspended because of organisational problems at the station that resulted in a change in management. The relationship of trust and comradeship that Hongkong had built up with the radio station was lost and he will have to start again. Meanwhile, the community is not impressed. "They are always asking me when the workers' programme will be on again, they say 'we need the information you give us. Why are you not there?'"

The control of community radio stations by station managers is against the ethos of community radio. Community radio should reflect community voices and be owned and controlled by representatives of the community.

MASS EDUCATION PROJECT

In response to the above, the labour hosts came up with the concept of Labour Community Radio Forums (LCRFs). The aim here is to form a collective of labour hosts, trade unionists and community representatives as a team that can sustain the labour show in the face of challenges to community radio. The labour hosts aimed to build this forum during 2006, but found it difficult without practical support from unions and radio stations.

This situation gave rise to the Mass Education Project (MEP), a partnership between WWMP, Ditsela, a labour education and training college, and the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), an HIV/AIDS education, treatment, lobbying and advocacy organisation. The partnership aims to develop a mass

education and information project.

The organisations seek to combine their strengths to rebuild skilled working class organisation using education and media at a local level. This will mean the coming together of Ditsela trainees and TAC members (treatment literacy practitioners) in communities as part of LCRFs. Besides becoming part of the production team and working to sustain the labour show, they will also initiate other activities in partnership with the community. These activities will take the form of meetings, seminars, campaigns, leaflets and newsletters as resources allow.

In 2007-2008, the MEP will be piloted in the Western Cape, Eastern Cape and Mpumalanga. TAC has already expressed an interest in training labour hosts to address HIV/AIDS issues on air. There are also possibilities of labour film festivals. The partnership will rely on the organisations' existing resources, which will be used to the mutual benefit of the project. Work in the six other provinces will take place in 2008 and 2009.

The MEP had its first provincial workshop with members of the three organisations in the Western Cape in August 2007. These media activists worked in area teams to plot out crucial educational activities, based on the needs of communities with the community radio stations as a central point.

Current listenership figures for the LCRP stand at 3 968 000 - 3 467 000 for community radio and 501 000 'Workers on Wednesday' on SAfm. In previous years, live labour shows were produced with Ukhozi FM and Umhlobo Wenene - SABC stations that have the biggest listenerships in South Africa in isiZulu and isiXhosa.

These partnerships have faltered due to management favouring corporate and government funding.

But the volume of workers' voices has risen through the activities of the LCRP. Alugumi Nekhavhambé from Popcru (Police and Prisons Civil Rights Union), labour host at Univen Community Radio, started doing the labour shows for six months of the year in 2004, and has now progressed to producing labour shows all year round. The three-person team of labour hosts at Valley FM do four labour shows a week in the evenings from Monday to Thursday in Worcester, which is headed by Chris Carolissen also of Popcru. He comments, "Even when we do not have the WWMP programmes to work with, you just have to read the newspapers or hear from workers what are issues you need to focus on."

Sharon McKinnon was retrenched from her job at a medical company, and decided to take a risk and study photography and film production. As a worker media activist she is now employed at WWMP developing the film production unit. She describes what it means to her to do labour media like when she audio recorded, took pictures and filmed the construction workers' strike at Green Point Stadium in Cape Town. "For me, I can be part of what's happening, Green Point Stadium, acknowledging the workers and what they are going through, that the mainstream media doesn't cover."

The silencing of workers' voices on television, radio and in the newspapers is being challenged by these media activists. Slowly but surely, workers' voices will turn up the volume on critical debates locally and nationally. ^{LB}

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