

# “Recognise POPCRU”

ZOLILE MTSHELWANE interviews two Johannesburg Prison warders about their union, the Police and Prisons Civil Rights Union (POPCRU). THOKOZANI MADONDO is a member of POPCRU's NEC and a member of the campaigns committee and TOZAMILE TANA serves as the union's legal officer.

## How is POPCRU structured?

We have branches, formed by at least 20 members. Then we have regions, constituted by at least four branches. From regions we have an NEC.

## What campaigns has POPCRU embarked on since it was formed?

The first campaign was to popularise POPCRU. We visited police stations and prisons, as well as community organisations and distributed pamphlets to potential members. We were very isolated when we started organising for POPCRU. The press shunned us and ignored our activities.

Fear was the major difficulty. Potential members were afraid of being dismissed, because a clause in the regulations specifies that whoever is found discussing politics or union issues will be summarily dismissed. Some potential members even informed the bosses of our organising efforts.

## Where is POPCRU established?

It is difficult to say, because POPCRU is growing very fast. Everywhere in the Transvaal, members are joining in great numbers, in Venda, Pietersburg, and Qwaqwa.

Initially the prison service was the fastest growing. But now the police department is joining up more than the prisons service. After our campaigns, the prisons service softened its stance.

## What gains has POPCRU registered since you started organising?

The most important was the acceptance

POPCRU now has from our communities. Today POPCRU shares platforms at rallies with leaders of community organisations. And the prisons and police hierarchy treat us as humans, they listen to our grievances. This is a far cry from the days when we were treated like objects.

## What grievances did you have at Johannesburg Prison when you embarked on strike action in 1990?

Black prison warders had to sleep in cells in those days. Our families were not allowed to visit us, even if we were off duty. Some of our relatives were arrested and locked up when they came to visit. Salaries were very low, someone with 11 years service used to earn R324. Black members could not include their wives or children in their medical aid scheme, while white members could. Above all, there was no channel for us to voice these grievances.

## How did you then start organising?

From January 1990 we started holding lunch time meetings where we drafted our grievances, including the ill-treatment of black prisoners, for example, stripping prisoners naked for searches. We forwarded a memorandum of these grievances to top management. When no response came, we started a sit-in at the prison. More than 90% of the black warders participated in this action.

The bosses responded by suspending us. Some of us were arrested after the Internal Stability Unit was called in. They teargassed us and set their dogs on us. Some of us were locked up at John Vorster Square for up to five



POPCRU march, Braamfontein

days. But we embarked on a hunger strike on the second day of our arrest.

After we were suspended we started looking for an organisation to belong to. We went to NACTU offices, but they did not want to have anything to do with us. They referred us to the MDM and we met POTWA comrades, who were very helpful. They helped us to make contact with POPCRU. Gregory Rockman came to Johannesburg, and the first branch of POPCRU in the Transvaal, made up of Johannesburg Prison warders, was launched on 16 March 1990.

### **What did you achieve?**

Two days after the strike began, we were allowed to include our families in the medical aid scheme. Our wage demand was for an R850 increase across-the-board. To our surprise, we were given more than we demanded. Our general working conditions improved. Previously, only black warders worked night duty. Now we change shifts with white warders. Administrative duties were reserved only for whites. Now black warders also work in administration. Promotion is no longer an exclusive privilege

for white warders. Everybody now writes exams to qualify for promotion. The situation of prisoners has also improved. They now have access to radios and televisions and can even use the telephone to communicate with the outside world.

### **After you were suspended, how and when were you taken back?**

We embarked on marches, pickets and sit-ins. We were taken back on 23 May 1990.

### **What setbacks has POPCRU suffered so far?**

The prisons department invited us to talk about recognition on 5 and 6 June. We did not respond to this, because they want to talk recognition only for POPCRU's prisons section. We want recognition for POPCRU, not only for the prisons section. They also want us to commit ourselves not to embark on any strike action. We find this difficult as strike action is one weapon we have to press home demands.

The SAP top brass is launching a union in opposition to POPCRU on 27 November in Welkom. ☆