

recruiting white members is uphill struggle for COSATU

COSATU affiliates encounter
many problems in
organising white members:
closed shops, white racism,
black suspicion. SNUKI
ZIKALALA reports

In negotiations with employers on wages, job security, retrenchments and pension funds, it is the black trade unions which are putting up ambitious demands. White workers are beginning to feel insecure as their unions no longer defend and satisfy their interests.

As artisan and former member of the SA Boilermakers Society, Daniel Pretorius, puts it: "The Boilermakers Society was no longer delivering the goods. We were not getting the support from it when we were in need. This has a psychological effect on us. The union is only interested in getting subs from us yet it did not see to it that I got my severance package when I was injured in the mine, nor protected my job."

Pretorius is one of the disillusioned skilled white workers who has recently joined the National Union of Mine Workers (NUM) and is encouraging more workers to do so.

COSATU unions have recognised that without drawing a large number of whites into their constituencies, they will not be able to

close the racial gap that exists at the workplace. However, despite their non-racial principles, these COSATU unions have encountered many problems in organising conservative white workers.

The problem of closed shops

NUM has appointed Louis Vosloo, a former miner from Impala Platinum mines, to recruit white miners. "The majority of white workers are racist. It is very difficult to organise white workers as their unions have signed closed-shop agreements with the bosses. We are not allowed to enter and organise workers in the mines," says Vosloo.

According to Vosloo, NUM has organised



Louis Vosloo: recruiting for NUM

Photo: William Matlala

1 800 white workers in the mines. They range from shift bosses, electricians, fitters and turners and banksmen (lift operators). The problem for NUM is that these white workers are in bargaining units covered by closed-shop agreements with the various white or mostly white union. This means that NUM cannot defend the interests of its white members at plant level (*see page 48*).

As a matter of urgency, NUM has given social assistance to white workers who have been neglected by their unions. NUM has won a number of legal cases for these workers.

Despite the fact the NUM has managed to help white workers who have been neglected by the unions, their participation in the union's activities is minimal. They are hardly seen at rallies or NUM locals. And workers are now beginning to question their loyalty.

Vosloo admits their presence is not felt. He says some of the white workers are concerned about the influence of the ANC and SACP in union affairs. "You must understand that most of them belong to the Conservative Party, and the fear of communism which has been drummed into their heads since childhood is still prevalent."

Black workers hostile

NUM is not the only union faced with this problem. White workers who have joined the South African Railways and Harbours Union (SARHWU), Food and Allied Workers Union (FAWU) and the National Union of Metalworkers of SA (NUMSA) are also facing the problem of assimilation. Some of the white workers end up not paying subscriptions because they feel neglected by their unions.

SARHWU's organiser Johann Beaurain says the problem affects both black and white members of his union. "The natural feeling among SARHWU members is to avoid white workers because of the scars of apartheid. Many SARHWU members do not communicate freely with their white colleagues," he says.

SARHWU's organiser suggests there is a need to reconsider the way union meetings are conducted. "We have to adopt a different style of organising white workers. ANC-SACP



Johann Beaurain of SARHWU

Photo: William Matlala

slogans do not appeal to white workers. Instead they have a negative effect on our organisational ability. Our meetings have to deal with work-related issues first and encourage a lively debate among workers." Beaurain also suggests paying attention to the specific grievances of white workers and incorporating them in union demands.

The white members in SARHWU do not attend meetings and their participation in union activities is very low. Some are reluctant to attend meetings because of the hostile attitude of their community and family toward a union with a mainly black membership.

"We need to understand this and communicate with them, so that they are armed for debate with friends and relatives," says Beaurain.

Neglect

NUMSA's regional organiser Robert Gammage describes similar problems. Gammage, who joined the union in 1985 while working at Eskom's regional office in Johannesburg and became a shopsteward until he retired in 1988, says education will help workers overcome their suspicions.

NUMSA has few white workers. It is not in a position to negotiate for their wage increase

or conditions of employment. Like in all the other unions, whites' participation in union activities is non-existent. Gammage attributes this to lack of information and the manner in which meetings are organised and conducted.



White workers: a need to integrate them into union structures

Photo: William Matlala

According to Gammage, "African workers hardly tell their colleagues about meetings. Sometimes these meetings are conducted in African languages and this becomes a problem for us. It is a fact that white workers do not participate in mass actions or industrial strikes and this worries their black colleagues. We still have a lot of spade work to do."

During one of our visits to Eskom headquarters in Johannesburg, LABOUR BULLETIN had the opportunity of talking to white workers who are NUMSA members. They asked not to be identified as they were afraid of reprisals from management.

They say they joined the union only last year, after being threatened with retrenchment. NUMSA defended them and their jobs are now

secure. Though they are members, they have never been called to any meeting. They are critical of the union's programme of mass action, but are prepared to take part in organisational matters of their union. They claim there is very little communication. "We still have to break the racial barrier," they say.

Will the racial barriers be broken?

COSATU affiliates have made little headway in trying to win white workers into the black-dominated industrial unions. Despite the fact that COSATU unions have the potential and the ability to organise more white counterparts within their ranks, and have strong organisational structures and a history of good service, they are failing to break the racial barrier.

White organisers who have been targeting members of their racial group have not been able to change their unions from within. African shopstewards are still very suspicious of their white colleagues, some for security reasons but also because they fear that if the whites stand for shopstewards' elections they will win them and "run" the union.

The mistake made by most unions is that when a white worker joins the union, he or she is expected to perform miracles, to be well aware of union procedures, policies and recruit hundreds of white colleagues into the unions. Yet there is very little trade union education or attempts to involve white workers in organisational matters. One white organiser could not differentiate between the ANC and the SACP.

As Gammage points out, more education has to be given to both black and white. Workers struggle against capitalist exploitation and apartheid has formed racial attitudes among the workers. Though white workers are prepared to be serviced and to be members of black-dominated industrial unions, they are still not prepared to be involved in industrial actions.

This process should not be one sided. African workers and shopstewards will have to involve their white colleagues in decision making and in policy formulation. It is only through active involvement of other racial groups that racial tensions can be removed. ♦



Orkney: a town of contradictions and despair

Orkney is a mining town not far from Klerksdorp. It is dominated by CP and AWB members, but NUM is using it as a recruiting base. NUM organiser Louis Vosloo is like the mayor of the small town. When we arrived, droves of workers came to greet him and shook his big hands. He asked the workers how many members they had organised. They smiled, saying they were waiting for Vosloo to arrange a mass meeting in the town.

The town is dead during the day. We saw women taking their precious belongings to sell at a pawn shop. We saw many workers limping as a result of injuries from mine accidents.

When the workers saw Vosloo, they asked about cases which have been taken up by NUM. They admitted they are identifying themselves with NUM now because their unions have turned their backs on them.

They were very open: "We never thought we would join a trade union led by a black

man. NUM has done more than I expected. The very same black leader I was made to undermine, is the one who cares more about my health, my family and job security," said one white miner.

According to Vosloo, white workers who have joined NUM have been given legal and medical advice. "White workers are very ignorant about their rights. Their unions have never cared to give them the information to help them when they are in dire need. We have discovered that a number of white workers who have been injured at their workplace have been dismissed and did not even get their severance packages. Rand Mutual hospital - which is a mine hospital - has a reputation for refusing to acknowledge mine accidents. This leaves workers in a desperate situation. We are now handling their cases and we might enter into a dispute with Anglo-American."

White miners are becoming increasingly critical of their unions. Those who are

disabled because of mine accidents are very angry. They say their unions have not taken up their cases or supported them in crisis situations. Instead they keep writing letters to remind workers to pay their overdue subs.

We were invited to an NUM member's house – Jeremia Cornelius Lingenfelder. It is a small three-bedroomed house filled with old and dilapidated furniture. Lingenfelder's wife and her friend and the children were a sight for sore eyes. Because of their obvious poverty, they were thin, and nervous. They smiled and shook hands with us.

Mrs Lingenfelder made us black coffee and said there was no milk. She complained that the family had not eaten proper food for days.

Barely holding back the tears, she told us how her husband had worked for the mines for the past 14 years until an injury made him redundant. His family were expected to move out of the house and had nowhere to stay. She related her husband's problems at the workplace as if she had worked alongside him.

The husband, who did very little talking, said he desperately needed emotional support. "I am now half paralysed due to a mine accident, but the mine management refuses to take the responsibility. I have been sacked and am not entitled to my severance package. My family has nothing to eat and there is tension inside the house."

Lingenfelder's wife has been forced to sell milk so that the children can have something to eat. Pawn shops have become their last resort as they sell off their valuable goods to buy food.

"It is only when we heard of NUM organiser Louis Vosloo that we decided to join the union. So far my husband's health problem and severance package is being fought for by NUM and we are satisfied with the progress," says Mrs Lingenfelder.

Miners' wives who bear the brunt of consequences of their husbands' unemployment are furious. They are demanding that NUM organise a protest march

into the heart of the CP and AWB town.

"We are sick and tired of being treated like children. When our husbands were physically fit and productive, mine management and the MWU showered us with praises and asked for more from them. Today they are crippled and struggling to get their severance packages. How do they expect us to live? If this happens to whites, what about black miners? I am sure they are just dumped in the bantustans without benefits," says Mrs Lingenfelder.



It was sad to listen to white workers telling us about their sufferings. It was also difficult to leave the town as more and more workers came for advice from Vosloo. Some were prepared to vent their sufferings in front of us as blacks, but one old man asked us to leave the room. He held his grandson very close and did not even allow us to play with him.

I asked myself: "Will he be ever able to swallow his pride and shake James Moulatsi's hand...?" ☆