

Reflections on the Samwu strike

*In view of the significance of the recent Samwu strike it is critical that some form of post-mortem is conducted. The **Labour Bulletin** poses a number of questions in an attempt to kick-start this process.*

The Samwu strike was the most visible and longest strike since the railway workers' strike led by SARHWU in 1987. It affected many towns and cities across the country. This exposed the public to the union's plight as well as fellow trade union members in other sectors directly to the strike and created the possibility of active and engaged support.

But how effectively did Samwu and its federation, Cosatu, exploit the advantages of the scale of the strike to ensure the maximum effect of the strike weapon? Was the union and its allies inside and outside of the federation able to build adequate solidarity as a counter to statements and actions by the Salga negotiators, the police, politicians in elected office, senior government officials, and in some instances, the press?

Questions to consider

What questions should the union movement be asking itself as a means of drawing out some lessons for the future? What are the useful issues to bear in mind in planning and building a national strike?

The following are some issues and questions, which readers can begin to think about.

Picketing and other actions - what is most effective?

Samwu officially encouraged mass

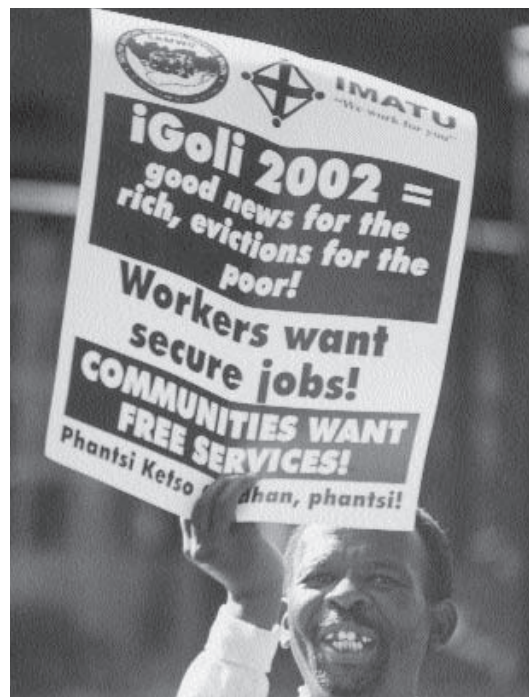
picketing outside of workplaces, but this did not happen on a large scale. Striking workers mostly gathered in single meeting places and marched. How can the picket tool become more organised and effective as a means of stopping production in cases where not all workers are on strike?

The union leadership took a public stand against the trashing of streets. But trashing streets is a popular world-wide tactic of municipal workers on strike as a means of highlighting the 'dirty work' of many municipal workers, and so it continued. Public opinion on the trashing seemed very divided. Do you have a view on such a tactic?

What other actions by the striking workers might have been effective?

Effectively using leadership thrown up by the strike

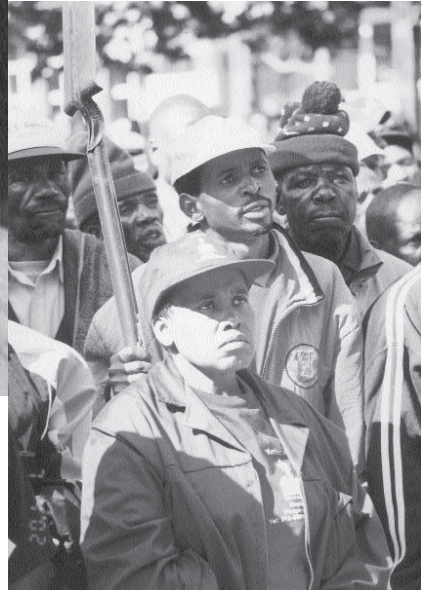
Strikes always throw up new leadership. The scale of the strike would inevitably have revealed hundreds of workers ready to continue to play a leadership role of one kind or another. It is often difficult for a union to find creative ways of accommodating and encouraging such new leadership, especially where they were not previously elected into official structures. Has Samwu been able to find a role for such emergent leadership both during and after the strike? What is the experience of other unions in establishing strike committees in the course of a strike, and what



happens to these committees afterwards?

Media coverage - getting the sympathy of the public?

Right from the start the union projected the strike as not only about the absolute wages of its members, but also about the huge inequalities in wages in municipal services. This was very effective in soliciting public support and sympathy. Are there any lessons here for other strikes?



White-collar workers – how do strikers relate to them?

The predominantly white-collar union Imatu, reached agreement with Salga. But many Imatu members actually supported the Samwu demand for a higher increase. During a strike, what is the best way of relating to higher paid workers whose union has already reached agreement? Indeed, more generally, how should unions in a multi-union environment relate to one another on an ongoing basis in an effort to *avoid* a situation where one union settles and another does not?

Building solidarity within a federation – was there enough?

Most Cosatu affiliates made public statements in support of the strike, as did Cosatu itself. Various unions threatened solidarity strike action. Were federation structures prepared to carry out the threat of solidarity action, if the strike had continued? In the same vein, were Samwu leaders explicit about what they wanted in the form of solidarity, and were they pro-active in educating and mobilising sister unions?

Building federation structures to take forward the Living Wage Campaign – was this done?

Related to the question of building solidarity within Cosatu, did the

federation effectively use the dispute to build its own structures and the Campaign for a Living Wage? While workers in all sectors identified with the demands of the strikers, to what extent was this boost in confidence translated into practical campaigning and building the strength of the local Cosatu structures, which are known not to be very active at the moment? And in the follow-up to the strike, how can all structures, but especially the locals, be strengthened to carry forward the Living Wage Campaign in all sectors?

To what extent has the strike opened up debate on exactly what a Living Wage is? Can it be said that even the agreed minimum for municipal workers of R2 100 is a Living Wage?

A strike fund – could this have been established?

The striking workers received no pay for three weeks. In some local areas, for example Pietermaritzburg, workers of other Cosatu unions made cash contributions to the strikers through the Cosatu local structure. Could more have been done in this regard? Is such financial solidarity best handled at the local level, or should unions set up national funds for donations during a strike?

A related issue is the extent to which workers in debt can undermine union

militancy. The union had anticipated that high levels of debt amongst workers would affect the planned strike. To what extent are unions beginning to address the issue of debt amongst their members and the underlying reasons for workers being trapped in a debt spiral?

Building solidarity with communities – why were there not more joint actions?

A few examples of joint marches with members of local communities were reported. What is the state of local community and political structures that there were not more examples of such joint actions? What is the role of strikers in mobilising community support?

Action against striking workers and the union – will post strike solidarity be forthcoming?

The strike is now over, but Samwu and its members are facing disciplinary and legal actions in many municipalities. Disciplinary action has been threatened against essential service workers who went on strike, and the union is being threatened with lawsuits to cover the cost of the strike. What will the response of the union's federation be to such actions?

Should the union lobby to review issues around essential services and the

mechanisms for reaching minimum service agreements?

About 60% of Samwu members are classified as essential service workers. However, if minimum service agreements had been legally endorsed then up to 70% of members would have been protected and not considered having engaged in illegal industrial action. The essential services committee did not approve a number of minimum service agreements. This aggravated the situation and threats of interdicts began to emerge.

Increasing pressure for long-term agreements – how should unions respond?

The agreement reached includes agreement in principle on a three-year contract, which will give workers an increase of inflation plus 1% for 2003/4 and an increase of inflation plus 1,5% for 2004/5. Many unions are coming under pressure to sign extended period agreements. However, the way in which inflation figures are calculated does not take into account the burden of higher than inflation food and transport prices on the poor. Do you have any experience of a two- or three-year agreement? What is your view of longer-term agreements?

The role of relevant information for collective bargaining

During negotiations it became clear that the parties did not have relevant information at their disposal. The union requested information around the cost of the total wage bill and a spread of the wage rates. Apparently, the employer claimed this information was not available. This type of information is critical for collective bargaining.

How should unions engage with former trade unionists who have become management negotiators?

It is understood that the presence of a key employer negotiator (previously a senior union official) created tension in the process. Such a person is perceived as being 'union friendly', but not necessarily by the union. Personal dynamics can, at times, cloud the process and delay agreement being reached.

How should unions go about rebuilding their structures following a lengthy and acrimonious strike?

Strikes tend to bring to the fore a range of organisational issues that otherwise would not be evident. Unions should share their experiences about what mechanisms are put in place to rebuild structures, if necessary. This is especially critical if differences emerged between the leadership and members as to whether the strike should take place.

The role of ANC elected politicians – could it have been different?

The question uppermost in many people's minds, and perhaps the most serious question of all is: Did the ANC government believe the strike was an opportunity to smash Samwu as a 'troublesome' union? Was there a political agenda behind Salga's stance?

Not one ANC councillor is known to have publicly supported the demands of the municipal workers. Was this because they were scared of being disciplined? Was it because they were ignorant of the issues? Or was it because they believed the demands of the workers were unjustified? Did Cosatu members put any pressure on their councillors? Is it completely unrealistic to expect such support? Will the absence of support from councillors have any impact on the next local elections?

President Mbeki publicly attacked the strikers when he accused the union



of causing embarrassment and 'betraying the movement' during the AU Conference in Durban. A number of commentators in the press responded by saying that Mbeki had made a big mistake, and that he should rather have seen the strike as a reflection of democratic rights.

The Minister of Labour, Minister Mdlalana appears to have played a role in pressurising Salga to negotiate. But where were Sydney Mafumadi, Minister for Local and Provincial Government and former deputy general secretary of Cosatu? And what is to be made of the Minister of Defence, Minister Lekota's call for the army to intervene in Durban? Why did Minister Nqaqula not intervene to restrain the brutality of the police during the strike?

Do you think there was a political agenda? What do you think of the role played by councillors, Cabinet ministers and the President? In the same vein, to what extent do members support the political agendas of union leadership? Do union leaders ever place their own political agendas ahead of the interests of their members?

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If you have any thoughts on any or all of the above questions, please write to the 'Bulletin'. Or use the questions to debate with others, and submit a collective view.