

Reply to: 'Indian teachers challenge SADTU'

SADTU is a unitary non-racial organisation. It was born out of the struggle against apartheid education. SADTU's launch in 1990 was the culmination of years of struggle to transform regional ethnically-based teacher organisations. SADTU was explicitly established on the basis of rejecting the kind of racial federalism that had characterised teacher organisations hitherto – and which persists in teacher organisations outside of SADTU. Its formation was a major milestone on the road to a unitary non-racial education system in this country.

It was then with some trepidation that we read in the *Bulletin* (vol 23 no 2) that 'Indian teachers challenge SADTU'. (Does it help to sensationalise sensitive issues in this fashion?) The gist of the argument appears to be that on the basis of interviews with Indian teachers on the Witwatersrand: there is serious tension between Indian members and SADTU leadership; Indian teachers experience ethnic marginalisation; SADTU members victimise other SADTU members who occupy principalships.

Tensions with leadership

Sabera Surtee reports that the SADTU leadership is too close to the ANC government, and that there is growing bureaucratisation and poor internal communication in the union. We do recognise that it is important for the

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Bulletin to raise these debates – but these are not 'ethnic/Indian' issues. Union democracy and political strategy concern all members. COSATU identified improved communication as an issue to be addressed. Incidentally, the supposed close relationship with the government did not prevent SADTU from embarking on industrial action on more than one occasion to defend its members' interests.

In her conclusion, Surtee refers to one of SADTU's strategies to combat bureaucratisation: '...SADTU leadership has proposed the implementation of teacher forums to bridge the gap between itself and its members.' It may interest her to know that this system has been in place for the last three years: at the beginning of each year, mass meetings are convened in each of SADTU's 54 regions. Here tens of thousands of members get a chance to hear directly from the union leadership and to question leaders. The author would have known this if she had bothered to contact the union.

Ethnic marginalisation

The article gives the unfortunate impression that Indian teachers in general feel marginalised inside SADTU. We are not told how the sample was selected, only that it

was confined to the Witwatersrand. If Surtee was seriously concerned to look at the position of Indians within SADTU, she would have looked at participation rates nationally, and particularly in KwaZulu-Natal where a substantial proportion of members and leadership are drawn from the Indian community. Incidentally, it is interesting to note that the photographs of SADTU members that accompany the article are taken from KwaZulu-Natal.

The views expressed by interviewees range from 'some Indian teachers are worried about SADTU's multi-racial composition' to the more considered argument that SADTU needs to consider that people from different historical backgrounds experience different problems. However, it seems to be a massive leap to conclude on the basis of a handful of interviews that, 'with the end of apartheid, ethnic differences and ethnic identity are becoming more important to Indian teachers...'. Such a generalisation requires much more systematic research to sustain it. Are these 'findings' generalisable for the Witwatersrand, let alone for the country as a whole?

Certainly, our gut feeling - working on a daily basis with comrades of all ethnic backgrounds - is that it is possible to develop solidarity amongst educators. This unity draws upon a common class identity and common interests around salaries and conditions, and emerges from a growing professional identity and a sense of being South African. Alas, the author does not explore these avenues.

Our rapid growth in membership suggests we are doing something right: from 30 000 at the launch in 1990 to 230 000 today.

Principals' problems

Surtee acknowledges the policing role often played by principals under the

apartheid era - and that SADTU effectively challenged these practices. According to Surtee, Indian principals interviewed believe they are targeted by disgruntled teachers using the mantle of SADTU. It is difficult to respond to these general charges - but indeed, some principals have found difficulty in adjusting to the new democratic dispensation.

Principals are well represented within the ranks of SADTU and also at leadership level. Moreover, the debate around the unionisation of supervisory and managerial groups is not new to the labour movement - but again, in this context, it does not appear to be an ethnic issue.

Summary

We are concerned that findings based on slender and unspecified data are presented in a sensational and conclusive fashion. Without additional information regarding the study's methodology, the conclusions drawn from the findings remain suspect.

There is a lack of historical background and contemporary context. What does it mean to tell us that some Indian teachers are worried about SADTU's multi-racial composition? Why then do they remain within a 'multi-racial' union? Perhaps racial/ethnic identity is not their only - or even their main - concern. Unfortunately Surtee does not pursue these possibilities.

SADTU is not saying that ethnic identity does not exist or does not matter. We just feel that this particular article is taking us nowhere.

Finally, we believe that the *Labour Bulletin* - with its long and honourable association with the labour movement - should at least consult with unions it purports to write about to obtain their perspective on important issues dealt with. It would also provide a useful opportunity for authors to check their facts. ★