

Reply to: 'We must be doing the right thing'

Makgane Thobejane, former general secretary of NEHAWU and now labour relations officer at the Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan Council, is part of the privileged class of bosses whose views are given a regular platform in the bosses' newspapers. These newspapers run editorials headed 'Selfish SAMWU' and 'Most backward union in South Africa'. It was therefore surprising to find the *Bulletin* granting Thobejane an equally uncritical space to air his views at length.

Conflict and animosity

The interview with Thobejane portrays the Greater Johannesburg Council as an almost harmonious workplace where the only problems are the union leaders. Yet it is hard to imagine a workplace in South Africa where the complete breakdown in labour relations has been the subject of more public discontent by both workers and bosses. The situation in Johannesburg is so bad that SAMWU has called for Thobejane's removal as labour relations officer. 'The labour relations in the council are worse than ever before,' said the SAMWU president and council employee of more than 20 years, Petrus Mashishi. 'Makgane Thobejane is allowing the city manager and others to openly flaunt labour relations procedures agreed upon in the bargaining council. He is encouraging them to break the rules of

Anna Weekes, SAMWU media officer, responds to an interview the Bulletin published with Makgane Thobejane, labour relations specialist of the Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan Council.

council's own conditions of service.'

The animosity that workers and council bosses feel for each other did not come through in the interview. When asked if he retains links to NEHAWU, Thobejane was able to respond that he still attends the union's central executive committee (CEC) meetings and political schools. His rejoinder might not have been quite so blithe if the question had been posed in the context of the current situation in Johannesburg.

For example, the *Bulletin* could have said: '600 NEHAWU workers from Wits University were laid off recently. They were campaigning jointly with SAMWU workers to stop the Wits and iGoli retrenchments. Both sets of workers were condemned by council bigwigs and Colin Bundy of Wits. These bosses even shared the same speaking platform at some Urban Futures events. How do you reconcile your status as a NEHAWU ex-officio CEC

member with your role as one of the movers behind the retrenchments?'

Allowed to evade issues?

The *Labour Bulletin* has a tradition of reporting news from a pro-worker bias, according to the first *Labour Bulletin* editor and SAMWU Head of Education, John Mawbey. But surprisingly, the *Bulletin* posed largely uncritical questions to Thobejane, that allowed him to cast his own spin over events in Johannesburg. None of the questions interrogated him on the basis of the actual events that have taken place, such as the blockade of the city by workers in early July or the emergence of the broad anti-privatisation forum, which is thoroughly opposed to iGoli 2002. Because these events were ignored, Thobejane was given the space to pretend there was no opposition to the plan.

Council bigwigs shun bad publicity like any other bosses, to the extent that Jon Qwelane's (Radio 702) producer said a few months ago that Ketso Gordhan will not share the same show with people like axed Soweto Councillor Trevor Ngwane. The capitalist press allows them this space to a large degree. This union would urge that, if bosses must be interviewed in the *Bulletin*, then at least let this be done in a manner where they are forced to account for their sins.

Debunking statements

It is now necessary to debunk some of the statements made by Thobejane and update readers on the situation in Johannesburg in a more honest fashion.

First, we need to focus on Thobejane's role as labour relations officer. Thobejane was involved in a scuffle on 28 June 2000. The incident took place outside the bargaining council chamber. It consisted mostly of a lot of shouting and pushing. Much of this was done by women

comrades. Yet SAMWU's shopsteward in charge of the community services cluster, Moses Zulu, was singled out and dismissed for assault. During Cde Zulu's hearing, Thobejane's only witness could not corroborate Thobejane's statement that Cde Zulu landed a blow on his body. The presiding officer recommended that Cde Zulu be given only a warning. However a week later he was fired. The strategic executive in Cde Zulu's community services division says he received orders from 'above' to dismiss Cde Zulu, although this was clearly unprocedural.

SAMWU president Petrus Mashishi is representing Moses Zulu and Elias Sedulawesi, another key shopsteward dismissed for a similar alleged assault. The union is appealing the dismissals.

Union bashing

Three key IMATU shopstewards were also dismissed for participating in a blockade of the city on 5 July 2000. Says IMATU president Clive Dunstan, 'We are going to challenge the council. Thobejane's new style of management is based on how much he can get paid. Labour relations people are appointed to interact between the employer and council, to have sound labour relations, and not to bash unions.'

Over three thousand other workers have also fallen victim to union-bashing. Disciplinary letters were issued en masse to workers for taking part in an illegal blockade of the city on 5 July. The fact that not all of the 3 000 were still employees of the council, or still even alive for that matter, worried Thobejane and his bosses not the slightest. What, after all does it matter, if a labour relations officer uses a years-out-of-date register to randomly select groups of names to discipline? Maybe this is part of what Thobejane describes as the 'fascinating experience dealing with workers'.



Casual workers are paid less than permanent workers.

Branch office bearers have also not escaped the wrath of the executives in the city manager's office. Four comrades were charged with misconduct in early September this year. Their crime - unfurling a SAMWU banner in an aggressive manner on the city manager's desk, and singing a song loudly and for several minutes, in April. The mere technicality that council's own conditions of service document states that charges must be laid within five days, and not within six months, is clearly a superfluous detail to Thobejane. However, it does remind the union very clearly that the union-bashing activities of apartheid's council bosses are not quite yet a thing of the past.

The SAMWU congress resolved in late August 2000 that enough was enough. A resolution was adopted calling for 'an end to the victimisation of our members; for the disciplinary charges against our members to be dropped and for the re-instatement of the dismissed workers'.

The congress also decided 'to develop as a matter of great urgency a programme of action to support these demands and the anti-iGoli 2002 campaign'.

Contested payment

The next statement by Thobejane that it is necessary to debunk is his claim that he wants 'to put the 2 700 casuals on the minimum wage of R1 600'. This has a hollow ring. SAMWU and IMATU fought a bitter struggle to have the minimum of R1 335 per month increased to R1 600 during this year's national wage negotiations. Yet no sooner had the negotiations been concluded than the Greater Johannesburg Council applied for a two month delay in paying the increase. Exemption is strictly for the so-called poverty stricken municipalities and has to be vetted and approved by a committee of the bargaining council. Clearly, Greater Johannesburg which is able to pay Thobejane and his cohorts R2-million in bonuses, spend R50-million on consultants

and thousands on expensive publicity agents and press conferences, does not fall into the category of destitute municipality.

And although the exemptions committee decided that the council's application did not comply with the terms, council went ahead and paid increases and uplifted the minimum two months later. 'SAMWU is declaring a dispute over this, and we want a labour court order to force them to back pay those two months,' said Dale Forbes, collective bargaining officer. 'Greater Johannesburg is once again the only municipality that shows its complete disrespect for the bargaining structures.'

Forbes explained further that no workers in Johannesburg should be on the minimum wage as this was put in place to uplift workers in the former Bantustans who, up until two years ago, earned as little as R400 per month. 'Thobejane's gesture is meaningless unless he upgrades the salaries of the casual workers to the minimum that the Johannesburg workers are earning which is about R2 400 per month,' said Forbes.

Promises, promises

The *Labour Bulletin* should follow up with the casual workforce in several months time and see what they are earning. It is SAMWU's guess that this promise will be yet another that disappears into thin air as soon as the fanfare is over, like Ketso Gordhan's 'three-year job guarantee' for workers in the privatised entities.

No sooner had the ink dried on this promise than 39 workers at the Civic Theatre were instructed to take retrenchment 'packages'. Over 200 workers at MetroGas were given a two-year job guarantee. Workers in the printing department were advised to cash in their pension funds (thereby losing a sizeable amount to the taxman), buy over the

machines and then tender for printing jobs along with the rest of Gauteng's printing giants. This is not the voice of commitment to employees, but the voice of political expediency. As a certain 15th century master of opportunism and political treachery taught, political leaders should never be afraid to say publicly whatever suits them at the time, even if this differs from day to day.

Conditions and retrenchments

SAMWU exposed two months ago that the ministry of finance had issued conditionalities to a grant of R550-million given to council. A minute of Transformation Lekgotla of the council, states that the 'conditions simply require adherence and commitment to the iGoli 2002 plan and its various target dates'.

This secret report, leaked to SAMWU, explained that the grant was based on the unilaterally adopted plan. 'Any changes to the plan could reduce the amount of money handed over to the council. What greater incentive to push on regardless!

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in an article published by the *Sowetan* newspaper in July.

The secret Lekgotla minutes also say that management has identified 'surplus staff positions at a labourer level that also needs to be rationalised'. It goes on to say that a 'credible staff rationalisation plan, setting out implementation targets and time frames, must be submitted to the



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Department of Finance by 1 November 2000'. 'In other words, staff costs need to be cut on an ongoing basis – read retrenchments,' says Ronnie.

So instead of asking Thobejane why council would be outsourcing functions of council and allowing him free rein to explain how he was protecting workers' jobs, the *Bulletin* could have put this question to him. 'Why is the tiny Lekgotla group holding secret meetings to discuss privatisation directives from the finance minister instead of consulting democratically elected councillors and communities on service delivery?' Alternatively the question could have been put: 'Why are secret meetings taking place when at the same time you are supposed to be involved in good faith with the unions in the bargaining council?'

Protecting the poor?

For anyone from a working class or poor community reading the *Bulletin*, Thobejane's promises of 'cross

subsidisation' that will 'protect the interests of the poor and marginalised ...' were surely the biggest non-statement. Is any *Bulletin* reader the slightest bit enlightened as to what this means in real terms? To put readers in the picture, Greater Johannesburg's idea of services for the poor and marginalised is to build 20 000 pit toilets on top of the water table in the townships.

The council might give the indigent seven free litres of water per person per day, although this is one of the proposals that has drifted in and out of iGoli 2002 which has never been formalised. Let us consult the secret Lekgotla minutes further. The minutes say that utility boards with 'limited political representation' should be established, because there is a need to limit political interference in micro-management issues. Direct councillor representation on these boards would be limited to a maximum of 20%. This does not bode well for the long suffering township communities who no

doubt will continue to languish without services long past iGoli's 2002 privatisation deadline.

Thobejane's explanation that the financial and institutional problems facing Johannesburg have been partly alleviated by 'belt tightening exercises' needs no rejoinder. For an executive who is part of a team that awarded themselves performance bonuses of R2-million and pays out over R50-million to American consultants like Price Waterhouse Coopers to talk of 'belt-tightening' is little more than a joke.

And anyone reading the daily papers will know that Thobejane's statement that 'the unions are the last stakeholder we need to bring to the partnership' is nothing more than a lie. The Johannesburg anti-privatisation forum was founded at the same time as everyone was supposedly on board with the plan. This forum is mainly made up of organisations and activists from outside SAMWU.

Corruption and incompetency

It will not help SAMWU or the citizens of Johannesburg to gloat in future when everything goes horribly wrong. First, the four executives will be happily ensconced in their next jobs with R2-million in their bank accounts. They won't be around to clean up their own mess.

Second, any financial loss to the city is a further blow to desperately needed services. Council was fleeced last week of R5,5-million by a company it had just set up! International experience shows that this is inevitable. State auditors in France uncovered examples of a company - a Vivendi subsidiary - invoicing twice for the same work. Vivendi is now trying to win the water contract for the Johannesburg utility.

The BBC exposed an English water company - Southern Water - which said it

was building eight new sewerage treatment plants when it was not building any of them - to justify higher water prices.

The communities in Johannesburg can ill afford this kind of corruption. It is hardly necessary to mention again that Johannesburg is the most unequal city in the world. The R5,5-million that was stolen from the public purse could have gone a long way towards alleviating the plight of the working class and poor had their been the political will.

Fight on

It is thus imperative that SAMWU, IMATU and all progressive forces fight the iGoli 2002 plan before it is implemented fully. Fighting it afterwards will be costly. Two people lost their lives in Bolivia in April this year fighting a water privatisation that had been unilaterally implemented by government. In Grenoble, France it took civic groups ten years to legally oust a private water company which had won a contract through bribery and fraud.

This response to the interview with Makgane Thobejane is not merely an attack on him. Thobejane is a pawn in the game being played by his benefactors in central government, who are clearly hoping to co-opt, bureaucratise and corporatise the union movement, thus buying themselves a decade or so before community and civic movements decisively regroup to fight their neo-liberal policies. He is one of many who think that weak arguments based on deceit and double dealing are likely to win the battle of ideas because they are espoused by people in positions of power. There may be a few readers who will be swayed by headlines which trumpet 'We must be doing the right thing!' But this will never convince SAMWU to pretend that the voices which are never heard, do not exist. That will never happen. ★