

# “Asijiki: A History of the South African Commercial Catering and Allied Workers Union (Saccawu)” Kally Forrest (STE, 2005)

Last year the South African Commercial Catering & Allied Workers Union marked its 30th anniversary. As part of its celebrations it commissioned a book, *Asijiki* on the history of the union. The Saccawu gender coordinator **Patricia Appolus** asked five Saccawu members, mainly women, to give their reactions to the book.

## IMPORTANCE OF HISTORY

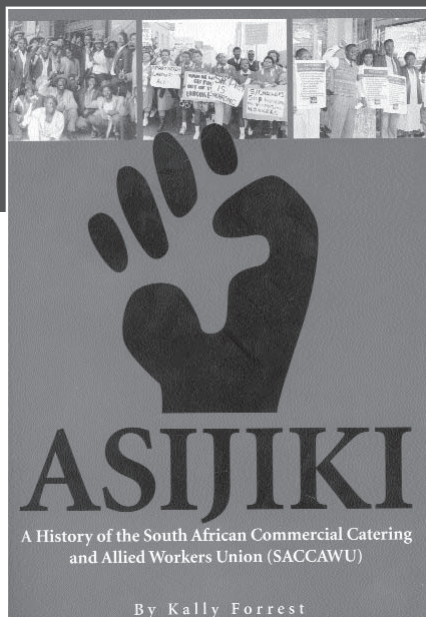
Most of the reviewers commented on how they enjoyed the book. As Amanda Mkizwana explained, “The book is giving us insight about everything that we have fought for to make us what we are today.” Simon Leballo thought it valuable because, “It will assist workers to know where they come from and where they are going to. The strength of the union is determined by its membership as we have realised when going through this book.”

For Mmule Mathabathe the book held an interest because she is a relatively new member of the union with little knowledge of its background, “*Asijiki* is quite fascinating, informative and interesting... After having read the book it became clear that there is a rich history behind this union. Amongst other things I began to realise that the workers’ struggle has come a long way. The 30 year existence of this union was accompanied by many struggles, which the union has won, and if it was not because of this book those struggles would not be known to some of us... I was fascinated by the manner in which the union waged its struggle. The tactics involved and the unity of workers resulted in human rights achievements, better wages and better working conditions.”

Indeed Kate Msibi believes a lot of the value of the book lies in informing the new generation, “The book will inform and show our new generation and the current members of Saccawu who joined after an end to the apartheid era, how difficult it was for workers to become union members and for organisers to recruit for the union in those years.”

Msibi also enjoyed the book because she has been around during a lot of its history and could remember the struggles, “My observations about this book, is that it has covered the *real* history of Saccawu. Emma Mashinini mentioned that strikes followed her

# Review



all over the place and all her life. She is totally correct because when I joined my company Checkers in 1986, we also went out on strike for recognition of Ccawusa and for the release of our leaders who were detained... The book also indicates how black workers were oppressed. Black workers actually did not join Ccawusa for wage increments only, they joined because they were badly treated by the employers and not respected as workers.”

The book also allowed these unionists to sit back and enjoy the union’s hard won gains and its rich tradition. “We have achieved a lot as Saccawu since the formation of the union. For example our own provident fund, parental rights agreements, agency shop agreements and massive recruitment amongst casuals. I think these are major victories. To some extent we have popularised the Childcare Campaign and in particular Childcare Day whereby workers bring their children to work showing that we are workers



and parents at the same time,” explained Mkizwana.

#### ACCESSIBILITY OF BOOK

A number of the commentators spoke of enjoying the book’s accessibility. As Leballo said, “The author here is narrating nicely the contributions of individuals and unions who formed Saccawu no matter how few they were which shows the strength and commitment of workers at the time it was needed most... The structure of the book also helps with following the events as they took place.” While Msibi commented on the fact that, “The book is very easy to read and understandable as the language used is understandable and easy unlike reading big English which one can lose interest in continuing to read.”

The frequent photos in the book also made an impact, although Leballo regretted that the Saccawu logo was not used on the front cover. Msibi enjoyed the images of the old Ccawusa (Commercial Catering & Allied Workers Union –

forerunner to Saccawu) posters and T-shirts, and one image brought back to her the racist insults workers used to endure from ‘kortbroek’ on picket lines. For Mkizwana the frequent images helped her imagine what it had been like, “The pictures in the book really help with seeing how things were in the past and make the history of Saccawu true.”

#### ACHIEVEMENTS AROUND WOMEN

The women reviewers were particularly interested in the sections dealing with the achievement of women and women’s rights in the book. Mathabathe commented that, “It is quite interesting to know that the union was formed by a female comrade. This itself shows that women can shape the struggle of the working class and I personally would like to pay a tribute to those comrades, like Umama Emma Mashinini. We are proud of her. She took it upon herself to engage the apartheid government by uniting black workers into a strong

organisation which eventually developed into this giant union recognised by the entire country.”

The women reviewers reflected on how Ccawusa/Saccawu have led in the areas of Parental Rights Agreements, taking up sexual harassment and in pushing for women leadership which “has not been an easy task to say the least.” Thembi Motlhamme commented on the union’s efforts to get women and casual workers elected as shop stewards especially as the bulk of women are employed as part timers, casuals and/or flexi timers who do not enjoy the same benefits as permanent staff. She also notes the importance of the employment of a full-time gender coordinator and the regular sitting of the National Gender Committee which has put ‘gender on the map’.

Motlhamme remarked that “... in all the picket lines shown in the photos women are in the forefront”. This underscored for her the maxim that, “Educate a woman, you educate a nation, educate a man, you educate an individual.

Resolutions can be taken but for implementation women take the lead.”

Most of the reviewers commented on how Saccawu had nurtured and produced impressive leadership, both men and women, who had played a role in Cosatu, in the liberation movement, and later in an ANC government. Ccawusa, they noted, was one of the first unions to participate in unity talks which led to the formation of Cosatu and a Ccawusa member, Makhulu Ledwaba, was one of its first vice presidents. Duma Nkosi is currently the mayor of Ekurhuleni, Edna Molewa premier of North West Province and Herbert Mkhize is director of Nedlac.

Mathabathe also felt encouraged by the appearance of long serving comrades in the union, such as Cde Max Ngobeni, “who started working with the union at its formation and he is still within our midst... if it was not because of *Asijiki* I would not have known this.”

#### CHANGES FOR BETTER AND WORSE

The book caused the reviewers to reflect on how the union has changed, sometimes for the worse, as well as certain problems no longer existing. Motlhamme regretted the weakening of the catering sector, “What was achieved by the union during the KFC strike [to achieve centralised bargaining in 1991] as reflected in the book unfortunately is no longer there. These are the most vulnerable workers in our sector and difficult to organise. If left unorganised the chances of achieving better conditions are minimal. Immediately we get the majority and begin to negotiate better conditions, companies refer us to the Bargaining Council Agreements. This

could explain the lack of militancy presently as opposed to the past, when the union did not participate in bargaining councils.”

She also raised the issue that today’s workers cannot easily be



dismissed. In the 1980s a worker could be fired because they failed to smile or the employer did not like them.

Motlhamme continues to reflect on catering workers’ current conditions and how the union could change this, “... most waiters do not have a salary but only rely on tips that they get from the customers and no benefits. Saccawu must begin to make research at those restaurants since there are those who are not complying with the Bargaining Council Agreement. Most workers are women and most companies are owned by individuals some of whom fall into the category of Black Economic Empowerment.

The union should engage the owners and form centralised bargaining that will involve all these

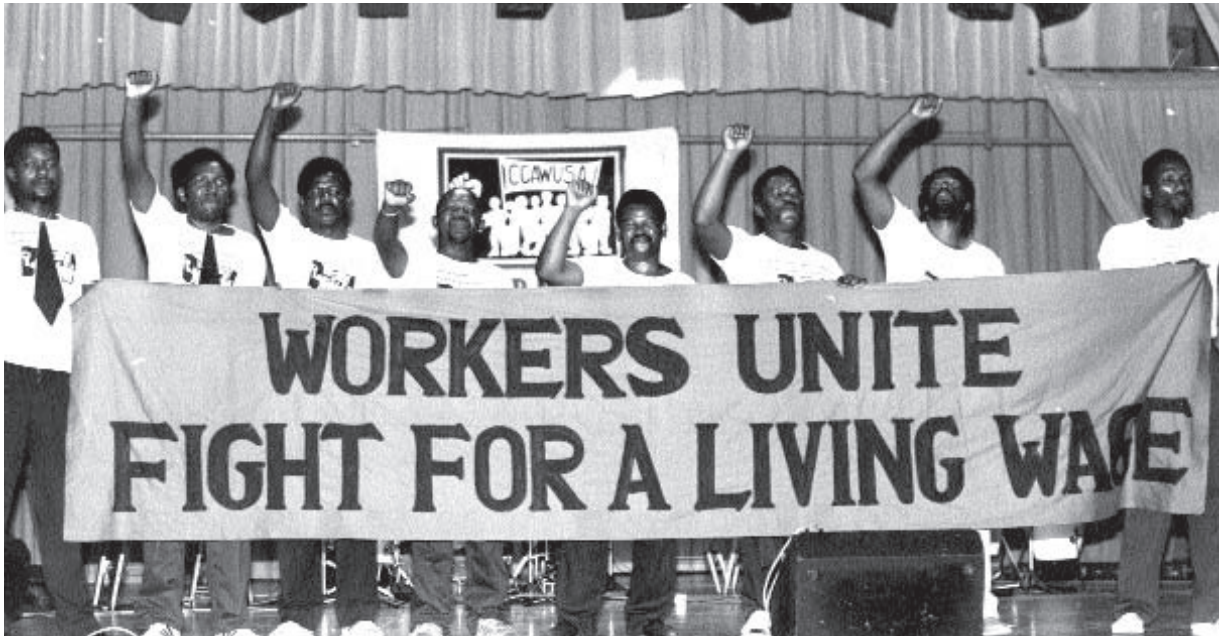
different employers on minimum standards starting with a Living Wage. “Most earn not more than R1 500, have terrible contracts of employment and employers dictate what union they should join. Immediately they join a Cosatu union their contract will be terminated... Some of these restaurants employ people that do not have a South African ID and immediately they join the union the employers remind them of their status in SA and dismiss them, such as at Monte Carlo-Kempton Park. Saccawu can be the biggest affiliate in Cosatu if we can organise the small fish and chips shops and restaurants.”

Motlhamme believes the book highlights for future workers that demands were not met easily and simply. It “was very tough and difficult to get employers to budge hence the strikes all over the sectors. New or future workers should not just relax and fold their arms thinking that their demands will be met without protests and building organisation and participation from workers. The book highlights that recruitment and building organisation play a vital role in any union. This tradition should be continued.”

Msibi observed that workers’ commitment in the early days of the unions was high and noted how the book describes workers taking over organisers’ and office duties when officials were detained. She continues, “Unlike today’s shop stewards who can’t even attend the union structures if there is no travelling allowances and lunch allowances.”

#### SPLIT IN CCAWUSA

Most of the reviewers commented on the terrible split in Ccawusa in



the late 1980s and the subsequent birth of Saccawu. Msibi remarks, "The issue of the birth of Saccawu is clearly stated as most workers are also anxious to know what happened to Ccawusa. It was not known to me that Saccawu was initially called Ccawusa."

She believes reading about the book is important "to update or inform the members what caused the split and how it was dealt with lest we forget it and learn lessons from it... the book indicated that it was actually caused by power mongering. Workers should know there might be problems in unions, but workers/members should come first."

Motlhamme took a positive view of the split believing that, "We need to be proud as a union after experiencing the split. At some stage we felt that the need to build a strong Saccawu that would deal with our members' needs and build unity at workplaces in particular. I think we need to congratulate ourselves on that aspect."

#### FINAL REMARKS

Msibi saw the book as playing an organising role, as she believes it is important "that the book is analysing and updating the victories of the different strike

actions. It will assist in encouraging more workers to join the union." She was critical of the book, however, for not reflecting on the building of the legal department and not dealing with the Ntombela case in detail.

For Mkizwana the book demonstrates that what exists today was won through many battles. It was not won 'through a miracle' but through hard work and strong organisation, "... comrades worked very hard for that and this is clearly shown through the contributions made by individuals who are interviewed in the book. The teaching of the book to me as a trade unionist/gender activist is that you must work hard in order to achieve what you want and never lose focus. The book is motivating, interesting and will certainly guide me in future."

Most of the reviewers believed the book should be widely sold to members of the union, including staff, 'especially the new ones!' because 'Knowledge is power.' Motlhamme believes it should be promoted amongst "casuals/flexi timers because some of them do not understand why we are struggling for quality jobs, why we go on strike. It is also disturbing to find a worker working on May Day

because he/she wants overtime pay. It betrays the struggle to recognise May Day as a public holiday. The book gives us a clear picture of the struggles waged to get victories like May Day.

Motlhamme ends with a sober message, "Whilst the union has made great strides as shown in the book, there are still many challenges ahead of us."

*The five Saccawu reviewers are: Mmule Mathabathe: Northern Region Gender Coordinator; Thembi Motlhamme: Wits Region Gender Coordinator; Kate (Sibongile) Msibi: Wits Region Shoprite/Checkers Alberton shop steward, Gender Co-Ordinator Germiston Local, Saccawu Central Executive Committee delegate; Simon Leballo: Tshwane Local Gender Chairperson, Pick 'n Pay shop steward Tramsbed; Amanda Mkizwana: Springs Local Gender Coordinator; Pick 'n Pay shop steward Daveyton.*

*"Asijiki: A History of the South African Commercial Catering and Allied Workers Union (Saccawu)" is available from Saccawu head office and STE publishers (011) 484 7824.*