

Revolt of angry workers

Samwu marches for accountability

It is common that when workers go on strike, picket or march, their anger is directed towards the employer as they demand better wages and improved living and working conditions. However, recently there are instances in which instead of the employer workers, wrath has been directed towards the union leadership. In the case of the South African Municipal Workers Union (Samwu) the workers were furious and wanted to know how the union coffers were being managed amid allegations of missing millions, writes **Elijah Chiwota**.

The over 2,000 Samwu members who marched in downtown Johannesburg on a chilly morning on 19 June were visibly angry and irritated by some of the actions of the current leadership of their union. The workers wanted explanations on how the union's finances were being managed. At the centre of the demands is the whereabouts of about R140-million of union money.

The placards the workers carried said it all:

- Do not privatise the union
- Samwu belongs to members not NOBs (national office bearers)
- NOBs: Hands off our union
- NOBs: Stop with lies and corruption
- NOBs: We are not going anywhere; we are here to stay
- Arrogance, attitude won't help the union and members
- Union member money is not for sponsoring luxuries
- We as revolutionaries demand the NPA (National Prosecuting Authority) to investigate.

The placards were complemented

by adaptations of struggle songs full of not so comradely lyrics that one normally doesn't hear at union marches. The march to the union headquarters in downtown Johannesburg, allegedly renovated for R32-million and managed at a cost of almost R400,000, only ended when the general secretary of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) Zwelinzima Vavi received a memorandum on behalf of the Samwu leadership. Since the march Cosatu has been involved in efforts to resolve the internal disputes.

EXPULSIONS AND DISMISSALS

In a memorandum received by Vavi on behalf of the union leadership the workers complained about how dissent is dealt with in the union. They described the actions of the leadership as an 'unconstitutional onslaught against the elected provincial leadership and the staff of the union.'

'Over the last two months, more than 20 dedicated comrades have been either suspended, dismissed or expelled from the union for no other reason than

seeking clarifications on the state of the union's finances, and for demanding a forensic audit.'

The workers accused the leadership of not servicing the members who 'are suffering from the ravages of inflation and rising costs, while corruption in local government continues to deprive our communities of the services they need, our union, which we pay for from our hard earned subscriptions, is being run into the ground.'

According to the workers, the union leadership has lost 'credibility by its mishandling of the wage curve agreement. This is a leadership that is failing the membership. They are so hell bent on maintaining their positions and privileges that they have forgotten what a union is supposed to be doing. How else can the president [Sam Molope], general secretary [Walter Theledi] and their favoured provincial leaders be on a two-week South African Local Government Association (Salga) sponsored visit to Europe while the union is in this crisis. Shame on them,' read the memorandum.



Investigate the fraud: Workers listen as petition is submitted to South African Police Service at Johannesburg Central Police Station.

Surprisingly, the union leadership disputed the legality of the gathering despite the march not only having received police permission but escort as well. The station commander of the Johannesburg Central Police Station even received a petition and acknowledged that the police Commercial Crimes Unit was investigating the allegations of the missing money.

LEADERSHIP RESPONSE

After the march a Samwu press statement signed by Moses Miya, deputy general secretary and Sanny Ndlovu, national treasurer responded in a press statement that the union had been involved in court cases involving 'former members and officials some of whom having been suspended or expelled by the union. These former members have been trying to hold the union to ransom through disruptions of meetings,

occupying our national office, intimidating our staff members and generally threatening the leadership of the union'.

The union leadership acknowledged the workers' anger over finances. 'It must be recalled that central to their dissatisfaction has been the alleged missing R140-million [from] the coffers of the union. The Central Executive Committee (CEC), which is the highest decision-making structure between National Congresses, has listened to such submissions and resolved to establish a task team to investigate these allegations and submit a detailed report with recommendations for a decision. It is therefore not correct to insinuate that the national office bearers are refusing to commission a forensic audit'.

There was due process to follow read the statement: 'We are therefore calling on our members countrywide to remain

calm and wait for due processes of the union to unfold. We wish to remind our members that the union is bigger than everyone of us and will not hesitate to act against anybody when presented with evidence of wrong doing. The Task Team has already met twice since its establishment and we are confident that it is making progress and a report would be presented to the structures of the union within 31 days as directed by the CEC...The union would therefore not accept a banana republic kind of a situation where members and officials do as they wish without following correct processes as outlined in the constitution.'

The task team is still to report back to the Samwu CEC.

UNION PRINCIPLES

Samwu's progressive views on a number of issues are captured in the documents and resolutions

at its 10th National Congress in Mangaung, Bloemfontein in 2012. Some of the documents called for a 'culture of participation' that led 'to building working-class power and control'. Although this was written in reference to local government councils it is also relevant to the union's current strife.

Furthermore, one of the organisational resolutions added: 'The union's main focus is to represent the interests of the workers from whom all mandate is derived.'

Political power was not an end in itself: 'Exercising political power must not be an end in itself. It must be able to demonstrate fundamental shifts to advance the interests of the mass of workers, the unemployed, the poor and the excluded, and to exert international pressure to

transform global economics'.

Samwu also spelt out its commitment to socialism. 'Socialist struggle needs to be pursued in every location and level in ways which seek to strengthen the influence which workers' interests can have on society as a whole.' How then can a union that believes in socialist principles, and with a militant history such as that of Samwu, fail to deal with its own internal problems?

ACCOUNTABILITY

According to Mick Moore and Graham Teskey accountability 'is an institutionalised (i.e. regular, established, accepted) relationship between different actors. One set of people/ organisations are held to account ('accountees'), and the another set do the holding ('accounters').

In the Samwu case the leaders are 'accountees' and the workers are the 'accounters'. Moore and Teskey list four stages that complete the accountability process: standard-setting, investigation, answerability, and sanction.

In the case of trade unions, including Samwu, standards under which leaders can be held to account are found in union constitutions which allow investigations to be carried out in cases where rules haven't been followed. Moore and Teskey add that upon completion of investigations leaders are answerable to: 'defend their actions, face sceptical questions, and generally explain themselves' and if they are found on the wrong side they are sanctioned or punished for 'for falling below the standards expected of them'.^{LB}

