

SAAPAWU in 1999

SAAPAWU was formed after a 1991 COSATU congress resolution had called for the creation of a trade union for farmworkers. COSATU set up a project that took responsibility for the process that eventually led to the launch of SAAPAWU on 10 February 1995. It was formed thanks to the decisions of other COSATU-affiliated unions – like FAWU, PPWAWU and SACTWU – to release members who fell within the scope of agriculture and plantation farming. The new union was set the following tasks:

- ❑ Organise farmworkers and build an effective trade union, based on democratic union structures
- ❑ Educate and train democratically elected committees to take control of their own union affairs
- ❑ Unify all agriculture workers in a national worker-controlled organisation.
- ❑ Combat differences among agricultural workers and unite them into a strong and confident working class
- ❑ Encourage worker solidarity in all spheres of society, along with other progressive sectors of the community
- ❑ Revive and encourage progressive international worker networks and solidarity.

The union launched with 35 000 members. The process began in a top-down fashion. After the launch

By looking at SAAPAWU's past, present and future, Bheki Ngubane highlights some of the problems and challenges facing the union.

congress, a head office was set up and eight regions and 24 branches were then created (as demanded by its constitution). As a result, most of the controls were centralised and the main responsibilities were entrusted to the NEC.

Financial constraints prevented the union from simultaneously opening regional and branch offices. In fact, no funds – except for a kick-start budget approved by COSATU's CEC – had been set aside to start a new union. The union operated under extremely difficult conditions. In some areas it had to operate out of COSATU offices.

Gradually, it managed to organise structures, improve recruitment and provide services for members. Several leadership and strategic planning workshops were held, while some officials visited Denmark on a study tour. Cars were also made available to organisers. In addition, SAAPAWU was able to forge links with regional and international organisations active in agricultural labour.

Strategic planning

In order to achieve its objectives, the union then designed a strategy, which called for:

- targeting big labour-intensive farms for membership recruitment and organising,
- building the profile of the union;
- tailoring training to members' specific needs,
- communicating effectively with members and shopstewards in branches, as well as regionally and nationally,
- networking with COSATU and the Tripartite Alliance, as well as with other progressive organisations in South Africa and overseas;
- building links with social movements;
- fundraising in South Africa and abroad,
- improving subscription collection,
- setting up and improving financial management systems,
- improving administration; and
- keeping reliable membership data and setting up a system to trace membership subscriptions

In October last year, a COSATU CEC task team was set up to investigate the suspicions of the federation's office bearers that SAAPAWU's financial problems were not limited to irregular monthly income (caused by stop order transfer problems). They felt that the union's leadership might have been having more serious management problems. The task team found that SAAPAWU was experiencing a deep financial and organisational crisis.

In order to overcome this, the team recommended several drastic measures:

- The COSATU deputy general secretary would have to be consulted on all future expenditures by the union,
- SAAPAWU would meet with auditors to clarify aspects of its financial statements
- The union's status would change from

an independent union to a project, which would fall under the supervision of a person appointed by the CEC.

- COSATU's project accountant would be put in charge of the union's finances.
- SAAPAWU's regions would fall under the supervision of COSATU.
- Some staff members would be *retrenched* so that acceptable staff/member ratios could be achieved
- Negotiations would be held with the authorities so that staff could be paid benefits
- All regional offices would be shut down.
- A new and more realistic budget would be drawn up.
- A process would be started to move towards creating a super-union, with agriculture forming part of the food manufacturing, retail and commercial sectors

These recommendations provoked serious debate within the union and even outside it. The union admitted that it was facing serious difficulties. In an attempt to try and deal with these problems, its NEC decided on the following courses of action.

- Membership had to be increased by concentrating available resources on a recruitment drive.
- Membership and subscription data had to be compiled
- Salary cuts would be introduced for a certain period.
- Costs would be cut strategically by terminating some lease agreements
- More effort would be put into educating members

There were also discussions about sharing offices with other unions and COSATU at regional and branch levels.

Education

The union has structured its educational work to include basic, intermediate and advanced shopsteward training. Education



SAAPAWU's first congress held in 1997.

structures like hedcoms, redcoms and nedcom are to be revived and strengthened, while local political education classes would be held by trained educators

The union's education department now also encourages shopstewards to learn through correspondence courses. It also aims to promote adult basic education and training. There will be an emphasis on helping members gain recognised skills in agriculture and in farm management. The idea is that this would enable farmworkers to understand better the dynamics of farming and agriculture.

The union will also educate members on gender issues and sexual harassment and its effects.

Action is also planned on child and migrant labour. We have applied to extend a Sid-Danida (Denmark) project on child and migrant labour. If this succeeds, SAAPAWU wants to explore the possibility of integrating all its education activities. This would include eviction-awareness

training which, we hope, would lead to a campaign around the issue.

As well, the union has sealed a contract with the South African Labour Development Trust for a one-year educational project. The ILO has also agreed to extend by months a project aimed at assisting rural workers with training. In addition, the National Union for Farmworkers (NUF) and SAAPAWU are receiving funds to develop educational materials for farmworkers.

Other problems

Other problems raised in the COSATU task team's report included the loss of membership due to evictions and retrenchments. The controversial and illegal closure of the Eastern Cape agricultural parastatal in July last year had a severe impact on the union. We lost members and quality leadership. Especially worrying is the fact that the negative effects of that closure are expected to continue for some time.

But beyond these difficulties, the union

is particularly concerned about the effects of globalisation on the sector.

Transnational corporations based in the advanced capitalist countries are reaping the most benefits from these processes. Meanwhile, developing countries' need for foreign investment leaves them at the mercy of those countries and corporations. This is having a harsh impact on South Africa's agricultural sector.

Farm attacks

SAAPAWU is deeply concerned about farm killings, but we do not agree with the perception that these crimes are politically motivated. Investigations have shown that the motivations are, in fact, criminal. Often forgotten is the fact that farmworkers and other farm-dwellers are also the victims of assaults and killings by farmers. Crime is a problem throughout the country. Crime-related killings in rural communities affect all farm-dwellers in different ways. Clearly, these killings and criminal acts have to be stopped. The question is 'How?'

If the anti-crime measures are to be successful, they have to include and involve workers. We need to deal realistically with the root causes of crime - including poverty and unemployment. SAAPAWU has noted the ten point plan of action that emerged from the Summit on Rural Safety and Security last October. We need to determine whether it can be implemented. Unions like SAAWU, SAAPAWU and NUF should meet to discuss how to strengthen their relationships and deepen co-operation, as well as how to improve working conditions on farms. Mechanisms have to be put in place to deal with serious (and often delicate) disputes before they spin out of control.

Agriculture and unions

We view agriculture as extremely important, not only for food production but also for

eradicating poverty. Unions could play a critical role in mobilising communities into co-operatives that promote agriculture and economic empowerment. We should fundraise in order to obtain the necessary training for this purpose.

Furthermore, workers in agriculture need to be organised into a large union. Working conditions on farms are still very poor and there is a constant need for unions to represent their interests. Therefore, no union should be allowed to collapse. Instead, unions should be encouraged to merge and form more powerful formations.

Organising farmworkers is difficult. It is not the same as organising factory workers. This means that constant assistance will be required. Funding is also needed for a newsletter that popularises educational issues, organising methods, farming experience and combats sexual harassment and HIV/AIDS.

The 1999 elections

SAAPAWU believes there is only one organisation that can take South Africa forward to genuine liberation: the ANC. Therefore, while we respect the individual's right to decide who to vote for, we encourage workers to vote for the ANC. SAAPAWU's education structures will take part in the election - by providing education and by canvassing support for the ANC. Our structures will be holding house and farm meetings to clarify questions raised by potential voters and assist them with registering.

Our union is committed to building a prosperous and peaceful South Africa for all who live in it. For us, this means taking on the task of changing an economic system that keeps so many South Africans poor. ★

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