

SEWU and Sikhula

Tips on organising informal workers

Informal mainly women workers are notoriously difficult to organise.

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through exploring two informal women-led unions, SEWU and Sikhula Sonke, give some pointers.

Informal employment is an area of employment growth in South Africa, and women tend to be particularly employed. Collective action is one of the few strategies that have proved to empower this group and to give them voice in policy-making.

Organising the informally employed is, however, extremely challenging. This article looks at the experience of two pioneering women-led unions that have had some success in organising informal workers – the Self Employed Women's Union (SEWU), which organised largely street traders and home-based workers, and Sikhula Sonke, which organises agricultural workers.

The organisational form of both SEWU and Sikhula Sonke are similar to formal unions in that they were/are based on the principle of direct democracy and membership

control. The experience of these organisations present interesting precedents for organising in the informal economy in South Africa.

ORGANISATIONAL BACKGROUND

SEWU, modelled on the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in India, was launched in 1994. Their Indian counterpart, with 800 000 members, is one of the largest unions in India. Over the ten years SEWU operated it had nearly 10 000 members in five provinces.

SEWU focused on empowerment of members, through organisational training and experience as well as training relevant to members' economic activities. It lobbied for access to credit and savings facilities for their members. The union was involved in many collective bargaining and negotiation processes particularly with local authorities. This resulted in securing rights to operate and access to infrastructure in a number of municipal areas.

SEWU was also active in national policy-making forums, making submissions on among other issues, small business policy, the Labour Relations Act and migration policy. At an international level SEWU was involved in International Labour Organisation policy processes – most notably the 2002 International Labour Conference on decent work in the informal economy which resulted in a significant shift in thinking about the informal economy.

In August 2004, SEWU lost a case brought against them by two former employees who were employed in the late 1990s. The judgement

placed too much strain on the finances of the union and it was forced to close.

Sikhula Sonke, which means 'We Grow Together', was launched in August 2004. It is a registered union that organises agricultural workers in the Western Cape. By April 2007 it had 3 500 members.

It has focused on the education of members particularly with respect to knowing their rights but also health and domestic violence issues. They have had considerable success in raising the profile of evicted farm workers and have launched a number of legal cases.

Their lobby national government on issues of concern to farm workers such as the Extension of Security and Tenure Act. They have been active in the Land Summits and are increasingly facilitating platforms for workers to raise their issues. One of their more successful campaigns, which will be detailed later, was lobbying the multi-million pound British food chain Tesco.

GENDERED APPROACH

Women dominate the poorer end of the informal economy, and face particular gender problems. For effective empowerment, women's leadership and confidence needs to be nurtured. SEWU took the decision to constitute itself as a women-only trade union. Sikhula Sonke opened its membership to men and women, but maintains a policy of women-only leadership.

Both SEWU and Sikhula Sonke have paid attention to organisational training, such as around worker control, shop steward skills,



Getruida Baartman, a farm worker and Sikhula Sonke member, describing conditions on farms at TESCO's AGM in London.

leadership, and membership rights. There are also many opportunities for members to be leaders in the multi-tiered union structures as well as opportunities to represent the union in a variety of forums.

In our ten year review of SEWU's activities we identified the development of a group of formidable leaders and negotiators as one of SEWU's primary successes. Although Sikhula Sonke is a younger organisation, it is clear that there are a new group of powerful women leaders that are coming up through its ranks.

Another component of gender sensitivity in organising has been an attempt to tackle not only issues within the workplace but also domestic issues. Both unions have trained members about domestic violence and health issues like HIV/AIDS.

Sikhula Sonke has conducted training on how to avoid foetal alcohol syndrome which is especially prevalent in the Western Cape. SEWU for a period provided counselling services and assisted members with

accessing social grants. It also encouraged members to diversify their skills base to secure better paid work in often male dominated activities. They, for example, encouraged members to train in wire fencing, block making and electrical wiring. These are skills many former members still use today.

RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES

One of the challenges of organising the informally employed is that they are seldom found in traditional workplaces like factories. They are in far flung rural areas but also in the depths of former office blocks in inner cities. Some are visible like street traders but many are less visible, in other people's or their own homes. Some are stationary but many, like seasonal farm workers, move from one area to another. Recruiting such a diverse group requires creative strategies to find the new and hidden spaces of work.

In the case of farm workers it is often difficult to get access to farms and for casual workers their place of work changes. Sikhula Sonke's

strategies are three fold. They go to pick-up points where they know contractors and farmers pick up casual labour. They distribute pamphlets and their newsletter 'Plaasfocus' at town centres on Saturday mornings since farmers often bring their workers into town to shop over the weekend. Finally they actively recruit in social and community spaces, like churches, schools and clinics. These strategies give the union a presence and profile in the broader community.

In organising street traders and home-based workers the founder and long-time general secretary of SEWU reflected in 2007: "The key is you had to go right to the person's place of work; to where people are. The beachfront craft sellers in Durban used to judge you according to whether you were prepared to sit on the ground or not. We had someone who asked for a chair once. She failed miserably. When it rained we used to sit under the plastic sheeting with the traders. There is often mafia that are in control of trading areas. You have to go and

speak to them first. At one stage we employed rural fieldworkers to go right to where people worked in their houses in sewing co-operatives or in their fields.”

FINDING NEGOTIATING PARTNERS

The informal economy is characterised by the absence of a clear employer-employee relationship. Some workers are self employed but have formal sector suppliers. For others, such as home workers producing goods for a sub contractor, the relationship between the employer and the employee is hidden or unclear. In improving working conditions for members different strategies of negotiation need to be employed.

SEWU's approach was to target individuals or institutions that have influence over a worker's environment and working conditions. An example where SEWU experienced some success was with municipal authorities. SEWU held negotiations with a number of municipalities focusing on street trading by-laws and the provision and regulation of infrastructure. SEWU interventions secured the right to trade and led to the provision of shelters, toilets and child-care for street traders.

In Durban, for example, SEWU established monthly negotiations with the Council and through these meetings it got a number of specific issues onto the Council's agenda including overnight accommodation, storage and child-care facilities. In this period shelters were built for traders throughout the inner city and a new market for traditional medicine traders was started. Although SEWU was not solely responsible for this, they significantly contributed to the pressure to incorporate traders into city plans and their sustained engagement ensured that interventions were appropriate to women traders' needs.

Sikhula Sonke had notable success in seeking out the real power brokers in its 2006 campaign involving the British food chain Tesco. It discovered that a number of farms supplying Tesco fruit and vegetables were not adhering to minimum wages. Getruida Baartman, a farm worker from the Ceres district, represented her case to Tesco management in London. The case received widespread coverage in the British media and resulted in a delegation from Tesco coming to South Africa to visit the farms at the end of 2006. Tesco consequently called in an independent audit to monitor the farms which supply their stock.

The general secretary explained the benefits, “Prior to this, Tesco relied on the farmer to say how he was treating his workers. In future members say that they are going to hold Tesco accountable... As a result Tesco supplying farms have made changes. They are adhering to minimum wages. Some farms now have toilets in the orchards and some workers have access to protective clothing when they work with pesticides.”

FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

Wages in the informal sector are extremely low and often inconsistent. In the September 2006 Labour Force Survey 42% of informal workers reported earning R500 a month or less. Some of Sikhula Sonke's members earn as little as R40 per week. Many of those working informally are self employed. For those who are not, the employer is either invisible or often actively hostile to union organising. The traditional way of collecting subscription fees through the payroll is thus not possible.

Both unions depend/ed on donor funds. SEWU's longest standing and largest donor was the Dutch Trade Union Federation's

development wing FNV Mondiaal, while Sikhula Sonke is funded by the British non-governmental organisation War on Want.

SEWU members paid a joining fee of R10 and monthly subscriptions of R8, while membership fees for Sikhula Sonke are R15 a month. From the outset SEWU aimed to be financially self sufficient based on a union logic that to be independent unions have to be self sufficient. This was never achieved. Only a small percentage of Sikhula Sonke's running costs are covered by its membership fees.

Given poverty levels among members, membership fees need to be low. Both SEWU and Sikhula Sonke have calculated amounts that would not be too hard but enough to make some contribution to running expenses.

There is the contradiction that for informal unions to be financially self sufficient they need to have many members but to do this they need funding to provide enough services to maintain membership. This suggests that a longer period of donor support is necessary in establishing organisations of the informally employed.

CONCLUSION

SEWU only managed to organise a small proportion of the total number of informal workers while Sikhula Sonke is still a small regionally based union. The experiences of these two unions however give some indicators for ways of organising this particularly vulnerable group of workers. LB

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