

Saccawu: 30 years on, more of the same

On 24 September the SA Commercial Catering & Allied Workers Union (Saccawu) held its eighth national congress and celebrated its 30th anniversary. **Kally Forrest** reports on the key issues to emerge from the congress.

Over 350 delegates (271 voting) and a wide range of guests, many of them ex-Saccawu and Ccawusa (Commercial Catering & Allied Workers Union - Saccawu's predecessor) attended the three day congress. Unionists heard speeches and music, watched distinguished service awards being presented, listened to extracts from a new book, *Asijiki* (No Turning Back) on the union's history, and remembered days of vibrant struggles and victories.

Yet behind this celebration lay the spectre of growing casualisation and on-going retrenchments. In a declaration emerging from the congress the union highlighted a number of challenges that it aims to campaign around. These included organisational, political, and socioeconomic issues.

CENTRALISED BARGAINING

One of Saccawu's priorities is to achieve centralised bargaining in its sectors - wholesale and retail and tourism and hospitality. This has long been one of its aims and the declaration merely represents a strong re-commitment to this goal.

For the union, centralised bargaining is imperative as it is impossible with its minimal resources to bargain in each small workplace around the country. If a national bargaining council existed in each of its sectors, it would ensure that low paid or unorganised workers would get decent work conditions and regular wage increases. Once employers and unions reach an agreement on the council, the Minister of Labour automatically extends the agreement to all workers in the industry. It would also mean that the union would only take part in one set of national negotiations a year in each sector. Furthermore, critical issues such as casualisation, multi-tasking, poor training opportunities and retrenchment could be usefully addressed in a centralised forum.

Achieving centralised bargaining in its sectors will be no easy task as the union well knows. At a Saccawu Bargaining Conference in November 1990 delegates committed the union to setting up Industrial Councils (the forerunner to Bargaining Councils) in food, clothing, furniture, fast foods and hotels. Later the union embarked on a sustained campaign to achieve centralised bargaining. In April 1992, 300 Saccawu delegates at a National Bargaining Conference outlined a Programme of Action to achieve centralised bargaining. It included declaring disputes, conducting strike ballots and occupying major stores, hotels and banks. The Programme was launched by 2000 members who gathered at the Standard Bank Arena in Johannesburg. By June 1992 petitions, pickets and marches brought 80 employers

from over 40 mainly retail and wholesale companies to a meeting to discuss National Industry Forums. Commented *Saccawu News* at the time: 'At this meeting more than 40 companies pretended they did not know what centralised bargaining was. These bosses refused to meet our demands.' Employers have never shifted their position from this meeting and have fiercely resisted the idea.

Winning a bargaining council in each sector is probably first prize. In reality Saccawu will probably have to work slowly towards this goal and fight for centralised bargaining at different levels. Both retail and catering employers are known for their lack of cooperation and competitive practices amongst themselves. Commented Saccawu Assistant General Secretary Mduduzi Mbongwe: 'In the Protea Hotels different managements from the same group even claim they are competitors.' The union is however, prepared to take strong action in achieving this goal in 2005 including taking strike action.

Over the years the union has made some progress towards its centralised goals. In the hospitality industry for example, a Witwatersrand Bargaining Council for Tearooms, Catering and Restaurants has long existed in Pretoria and Johannesburg where Saccawu bargains wages and conditions. Saccawu's initiatives have resulted in the extension of the council to the whole of Gauteng and the Vaal with the ultimate aim of setting up a national bargaining council.

Even where a centralised forum exists however, Saccawu often faces a battle to transform established councils. In hospitality, small conservative white, Indian and coloured unions tend to side with employers on the council. This is highly problematic as Saccawu's restaurant members have little power to put pressure



on employers sitting on the council as they mainly work in small workplaces. In the wholesale and retail sector however, established councils do not exist, which will give Saccawu the chance to push for new councils that operate in a more democratic manner.

There have also been problems with monitoring agreements from hospitality bargaining councils, as too many outlets exist for council agents to successfully monitor them.

RECRUITMENT

Saccawu has also pledged itself to an intensive recruitment campaign. It aims to recruit a minimum of 50 new members a month per official and is encouraging shop stewards to commit themselves to the growth of the union. At its first CEC after congress it will develop a strategy to ensure that it achieves 50+1 in all its companies.

What is important about this campaign is that the union aims to intensify the

recruitment of casual workers as well as of young workers. Unions have been criticised for avoiding the recruitment of casual labour and taking up their rights, in favour of defending permanent workers. It is difficult to win rights for casuals, and permanent workers are not always willing to support casuals' struggles for fear of being undercut by them. Saccawu however committed itself in 1999 to organising such workers.

In the early 1990s Edgars, Woolworths, and Pick 'n Pay brought in casual workers in small numbers. During the 1990s and 2000s however the use of casuals became more and more common. By the end of the 1990s, 40% of jobs at Edgars and Pick 'n Pay were casual and Woolworths led with 70% casual workers. In this way employers made large cost savings as casuals were not eligible for the benefits that permanents received, their wages were low, employers decided on their hours of work, and if the company did not need or like a casual it simply did not

employ the worker again. Job security was non-existent and the recognition agreement did not cover casuals as they belonged to no trade union. Many casuals had worked for years at the same company for no more than 24 hours or less a week. Working under 24 hours meant that they could not contribute to the UIF or receive unemployment benefits. Casual labour is particularly bad for women as paid maternity leave, medical benefits and training is often not available to them.

In the beginning, the union's approach to organising casual workers was conflicting. As early as 1991 it launched a campaign using the slogan 'No to Flexibility - No to Casualisation' to protest and fight against the growth of casual labour. The union however did not develop a clear strategy around casual workers on what it wanted to win. Whilst it sympathised with casuals' grievances, addressing them was difficult. The union won limited rights in some stores but casuals did not become part of the



bargaining unit. At the 1999 Saccawu National Congress however an important shift occurred when it resolved to represent casuals and to move away from largely servicing full-timers. It also resolved to encourage unity between casuals and full-timers.

From this time on it recruited growing numbers of workers in stores such as Woolworths, Pick 'n Pay and Checkers. It was this campaign that resulted in a groundbreaking strike at Shoprite in October 2003. About 30 000 mainly casual Shoprite workers downed tools in a two week legal strike. When they returned to work the company agreed that casuals could work up to 100 hours a month, they could join the company or union retirement scheme, and Shoprite would provide them with uniforms. Shoprite also guaranteed 60 hours work per month back paid at the previous rates of pay. The company agreed to take service into account and it also granted shop steward facilities for casuals and agreed to negotiate work conditions in future.

This strike signaled a growing commitment to organising casuals on Saccawu's part. Saccawu's 2005 Congress Declaration underscores this.

Saccawu also committed itself to recruiting more young workers. This may

seem a simple statement but it hides a realisation that the union has come to. In the late 1990s and 2000s Saccawu faced a new kind of workforce.

The political environment had altered and this involved changes in younger members' attitudes to unionism and to taking risks. Saccawu President, Amos Mothapo describes the new young membership in this way: 'They were born after the struggle. Before, the level of mobilisation was high so we advanced quickly but this is now a luxury that is not here today. We have an old leadership mindset but on the ground we have sophisticated membership.' Saccawu believes its style of recruiting and organising has to change to accommodate these young workers who are not necessarily politically aware. According to Mothapo a new meeting strategy must be developed. 'They're not interested in coming to workshops or even joint shop steward councils to strategise. The union culture has to change. They want to jor!' Meetings need to be quick and union gatherings must have a fun element.



PICKETING RIGHTS

At the congress the union also resolved to campaign for effective picketing rights in shopping malls. In the last few years Saccawu has been plagued by the inability to stage strikes in malls where many of their big retail companies trade.

In the early years of its existence, especially in the 1980s, many large retail companies owned stand-alone stores. This made it easy for the union to stage pickets around the premises and to engage with customers on their strike issues. This tactic was restricted with the advent of shopping malls. In the 2003 Shoprite strike, for example, shopping mall managers prohibited pickets and often worked with Shoprite management to prevent them. Mall security also harassed picketers while adjacent stores complained that pickets encroached on their shopfronts. Workers in

these stores had to stay at home or join pickets in other stores.

If the union is to stage effective strikes, it needs to address this issue and negotiate an equitable solution.

SECTORAL JOB SUMMITS

Another priority set out in the Declaration is to mobilise members behind a Sectoral Jobs Summit programme in wholesale and retail and tourism and hospitality. The union has long realised that it can no longer fight job losses and deteriorating conditions in its industries without addressing broader economic issues. Many industries and unions are facing similar problems and Cosatu believes that government and employers have a responsibility to uplift working people's conditions and to assist in the fight against poverty.

In 1998 government convened a Presidential Jobs Summit to investigate unemployment and job creation. Out of this, in 2003, grew the Growth and Development Summit (GDS) which mandated each industrial sector to convene Sectoral Jobs Summits where employers and trade unions should meet to address problems, challenges and growth paths in their industries. The aim is for concrete and implementable policies to emerge from these summits which will be integrated into South Africa's overall trade policies. Saccawu wants to convene a Jobs Summit before the Soccer World Cup in 2010 in order to ensure that catering workers are not exploited in the rush to make South Africa ready for the event.

Employers in the Wholesale and Retail Sectors have shown that they are willing to take part in Sectoral Jobs Summits to chart an acceptable way forward for these sectors. At the Summit the union aims to address job creation in a particular way. Says Assistant General Secretary Mduzuzi Mbongwe: 'Our key concern is to address "jobs of poor quality". There is a lot of talk by employers that catering is a job creation sector but the union believes they must generate jobs of better quality. Atypical forms of employment that leave workers

and their families insecure and poverty stricken have to go.

Engagement at Nedlac and the intended jobs summits also fits in with Saccawu's commitment to mobilising around the Right to Work where it fully endorses Cosatu's Jobs & Poverty campaign. The union takes as its starting point a clause in the Freedom Charter which states: 'There shall be work and security. The state shall recognise the right and duty of all to work.' One of the issues it intends to engage employers and government on at Nedlac is the closure of retail stores which thereafter reopen in other parts of Africa where labour is less organised. Simultaneously, the union aims to educate and mobilise its members to participate in the rolling mass action which Cosatu is currently coordinating. This action, it believes, will put pressure on Nedlac participants and other organs of government to seriously focus on the creation of quality jobs.

ORGANISATIONAL ISSUES

At its 2002 Congress, delegates mandated Saccawu to undertake an Organisational Review Process. This process grew out of a Cosatu resolution committing unions to adapt their organisational strategies in order, in the words of a Saccawu pamphlet, to reposition 'to place the union in a firm position to confront the challenges brought about by a transforming society'. Assisted by Ditsela, a union education body, Saccawu's Mothapo Review Team travelled around the country to ensure that shop stewards took part in the evaluation. Now three years later at the 2005 Congress, the union ratified the recommendations of the team's report and mandated the national office bearers to oversee the implementation of these proposals. These included organisational recommendations on administration, finances, education and staff and leadership development.

In the education arena the union wants to commit 10% of its total income to organisational education, training and development particularly for its shop stewards. Shop stewards it believes need to

develop improved communication and public speaking skills in order to better convey the union's message to its membership and to aid the process of recruitment. This new injection of income into education will be utilised to extend the education unit into all regions. Union education, it believes, should also move beyond the confines of Saccawu into progressive youth and student formations. This will strengthen cooperation with youth bodies and both educate young people on the importance of unions and raise levels of political debate.

Worker unity also emerges as an important focus for Saccawu. It commits itself to Cosatu's goal of creating super unions to augment worker power through better coordination across sectors of the economy, particularly in times of dispute. Saccawu has identified unions that it needs to firstly work with, and then consider the possibility of a merger. These unions include SA Clothing & Textile Workers Union (Sactwu), Food & Allied Workers Union (Fawu), and National Union of Metalworkers of SA (Numsa). Sactwu's organisation of clothing and footwear factories clearly overlaps with Saccawu's retail companies who market such products. Fawu organises companies who produce food and beverages which are supplied to Saccawu retail companies, while Numsa organises auto workers who are involved in the distribution of vehicles and motor components.

POLITICAL AND SOCIOECONOMIC

In the political arena the union makes no significant break with past policies. It recommits itself to the realisation of the Freedom Charter and cautiously approaches the issue of Jacob Zuma. Here it endorses the ANC NEC decision and commits itself to monitoring developments as they unfold.

It also commits itself to mobilising its members in order to ensure a landslide victory for the ANC in local government elections.

Whether Saccawu will be able to implement these new directions remains to be seen, especially as it is still grappling with financial and capacity problems. LB