

Sadtu provincial leaders disclose their HIV status

*Are unions doing enough to reduce the stigma around HIV/AIDS and are they encouraging their members to talk out? The **Labour Bulletin** spoke to **Itumeleng Mbreme** and **Nomvulo Vilo** – two teachers and members of the SA Democratic Teachers Union (Sadtu) – who have disclosed their HIV status.*

Itumeleng Mbreme and Nomvulo Vilo are amongst the first members of Sadtu to disclose their HIV status not only within their immediate communities, but to their union and their fellow teachers in the schools where they teach. Both received unambiguous support from their schools but many of their colleagues believe they are both lying.

Moreme disclosed his status last year after discovering that he was HIV positive five years ago. Since that time he has told all his learners. Some parents have not reacted positively, asking why he told their children. Others have been positive about his move. He believes that as a teacher of life skills, it would be irresponsible if he did not educate learners about HIV/AIDS and inform them of his status so that they can see that the disease is not necessarily a death sentence.

Both Moreme and Vilo are the first teachers in their schools to reveal their status. They believe it was the right thing to do in the current climate which is still one of denial. Moreme says: 'It was the right thing to reveal my status as this will create an

environment where people will be more open to talk about the disease'. He says people in his community and his workplace now come and talk to him (and his wife who is also HIV positive).

Vilo has not had the same experiences in Idutywa in the Eastern Cape where people appear less willing to talk about HIV/AIDS. She says that she has not been able to launch a support group while Moreme in Bushbuckridge, Limpopo is involved in an active support group set up as part of the National Association of People Living With HIV/AIDS (NAPWA).

Vilo found out that she was HIV positive in 1999 and immediately told her family and those people around her. She says the failure to set up a support group is largely based on the myth that if you are positive, then you are bewitched. She has also not yet reached the point where she has told her learners even though her colleagues are aware of her status. Vilo and Moreme both believe that stigma is not only a problem in their communities but also in the union. Both say other comrades in the union

do not come freely to talk to them about their status. 'There is a lot of denial in the union and teachers are afraid to talk about the disease,' they say. They indicated that:

- The union should motivate and educate members to be more aware of the disease and ensure mechanisms are introduced to combat the spread of the disease amongst teachers.
- Teachers should be more open when they find out their status in view of the role they play within communities.
- There is insufficient focus on peer educations and more aggressive education in the union around HIV/AIDS.

Both Vilo and Moreme revealed their status because they believe they can make a difference. Moreme says: 'My role is to help others in denial.'

Moreme is the secretary of Sadtu's provincial executive committee in Limpopo and chairperson of the Bushbuckridge NAPWA branch. Vilo is the deputy secretary of the Idutywa branch in the Eastern Cape.