

Howard Gabriels interviews SALIE MANIE, chairperson of the Cape Town branch of the SAMWU and recently co-opted member of the Western Cape ANC Regional Executive Committee

The leader in the Cape Town municipal strike in 1990

Early days

I am 42 years old, the eldest of six children. I was born in District Six. My father had a very serious accident when I was about twelve years old and so he was an invalid for many years. We lived off a small government grant which my mother supplemented by selling samoosas and dresses.

My mother was a religious instructor at the mosque. Religion has always played a central role in my life. The concept of justice have been ingrained in our family. My mother brought us up not to compromise on what was right. If something is right, it is right. I believe in God. I also believe in social justice. I still see myself as a Muslim, but I also see myself as a socialist.

When I matriculated, I was forced to go and work because I was the eldest one in the family. My first job was as an accounts clerk, but then I started as an apprentice as a radio and television technical.

One incident that I can still vividly remember happened when I was working at this company that sold expensive audio equipment. A person from Bellville reported a fault and requested a technician. I was asked to attend to this call.

I went to this house dressed in my white coat armed with a bag of tools. When I got to the door, this white guy opened and asked: What do you want. I said I was sent to repair the hi-fi. He said: "Ek laat nie hotnotte toe om

aan my goed te werk nie. Vat jou hier weg voor ek my geweer gaan haal en jou skiet." (I don't let hottentots work with my things. Get yourself away otherwise I'll shoot you.)

I eventually started my own little radio and TV repair shop which I had for eight years. Then I decided to sell up and go to university to study for a BSc. While waiting, I got myself a job at the City Council.

I join the unions

Within six months I was elected as a shop steward. Things happened very fast. I was then in my mid thirties. I started to throw myself into the union. Six months later I was elected as the vice president for CTMWA. I served on the planning committee to launch the national union for municipal workers. It was a difficult task to bring the five unions together. There were union that were aligned to the UDF and also unions that were close to FOSATU. At the time we emphasised the need to build a solid organisational infra-structure.

Looking back it was a correct approach, Today our membership stands at 80 000. Our union is growing at a very fast pace and even now we have to review our structures.

Meetings were normally conducted in English, so only a few people would speak in the meetings. I felt it was important that this changed. I started to address meetings in

Afrikaans, in fact in "Kaapsetaal". I felt that we needed to make everyone feel comfortable to express their views regardless of language and content. Many shop stewards who previously would not speak started to participate in the meetings. More people became more active.

Another event that was important in changing the union was when in 1987 the workers mainly in the cleansing department wanted to go on a go slow. The workers were not happy with the wage offer of the council. Initially the leadership were cautious, but workers went on the go-slow and so started to experience what worker power really meant. One can talk about worker power, but once you have a taste of it you cannot go back.

A seed was planted, but it did not take years to grow into a tree. Something happened which made the seed just burst into a thousand pieces and grow all over the show. Workers were now prepared to take up issues and challenge management. Ordinary workers were standing up on issues they would normally accept.

We then consolidated the organisational infra-structure. We had many depot meetings. The union went down to the grassroots. The question of report-backs and mandates became very important. It took workers time to understand what a union is and how workers control it via the elected structures. They started to understand they were the union.

In 1990 the big strike took place. The workers rejected the councils wage offer. The workers were determined to fight for a living wage. We expected to have about 1 000 workers to demonstrate at the civic centre, but ended up with about 10 000, singing songs that they create around their demands.

One day when I had to address the crowd. Council said they were not prepared to negotiate further, but that everyone must leave the civic centre and return to work. When I asked people to put up their hands in favour of leaving, not a single hand went up. And ten thousand hands shot up when people voted to stay. Then they shouted: "môre weer". That day one could see democracy in action.

Today we have an extremely militant

workforce who are aware of their rights.

The developments in the garment industry have had a big impact on us. Often one would find a council worker married to a garment worker.

Coloured workers were caught in that in-between situation, between the privileged and those that were deprived. Whilst they were treated better, they also looked down on those who were less privileged. But in their own work situation they had all the reasons to feel disgruntled. They were also discriminated against.

From theory to bread-and-butter issues

If you look at CTMWA, the approach then was that you debate all the heavy political issues with the accompanying theory and the need to take the working class forward. The change came about when we started talking bread and butter issues and moved away from the rhetoric. We dealt with the same political issues in simple language that everyone could understand. When the workers started to see what politics was in that kind of language they realised that it was within their grasp.

The achievements of COSATU and UDF are key considerations when the ANC wants to develop a strategy to draw in the coloured people. The ANC has to ask why people who are opposed to the NP and the apartheid government, people who are prepared to demonstrate their opposition, do not want to become active in the ANC. It points to inadequacies in the ANC and its approach to organising the coloured workers. The ANC is still perceived as an African organisation. This is an even bigger problem with the whites. The ANC must find ways to draw in all people who are opposed to apartheid. The task of presenting the ANC as a truly nonracial party needs to be addressed by taking up the issues that are relevant to the community that it wants to organise.

Major challenges

We face many challenges today in the union and in the country.

One is the establishment of a single public

sector union. This is presently being addressed in SAMWU and COSATU. I believe it is the only way to go and that SAMWU has an important role to play.

The restructuring of the economy will have an impact on all aspects of society. Debates are still dealt with at an ideological level. We need to deal with the issue in a practical way. The public sector now is a very inefficient machine.

It is not good enough to do what the establishment is calling for. They want to have a reduced public sector and a reduction of the role of the state in the economy. We should take into account the size of the public sector. More than 60% of all whites that are employed are employed in the public sector. The NP has employed some of these people regardless of the contribution they can make. The same inefficient system also affects the very same people we represent. We need to be clear we do not seek to solve a problem on the one side and create a bigger problem on the other.

When we talk about the new public sector it will mean that some people will be affected, including the people we represent. Especially when one wants to avoid the duplication that apartheid caused with its homeland policy and many racist departments. Workers have an understanding of the discrimination that is still taking place. Workers understand how they are wasting the tax payers money.

Local government is another important issue. If we are working for a truly democratic society, then we must bring government as close as possible to the people. The Nats are also saying this, but I believe with ulterior motives. But we also need to have a strong central government in order to correct the inequalities of the past.

There are many important aspects of local government on which SAMWU can make a contribution. Take for example the question of traffic control. In our union we have a number of people who have skills in this area and are committed to playing a constructive role in the new SA.

What worries us a lot is all these interim measures. We are concerned that some people are saying that the black local authorities must



disband because they are illegitimate. They don't see that SAMWU members are retrenched almost with the sanction of the democratic movement. We feel that SAMWU should not be excluded from the restructuring of the public sector.

It would be a terrible thing if we got the vote, the franchise, but there was no change in our living situation. The unions must ensure the quality of the lives of the workers improves.

My family and my work

I am married and we have three children. For a long time, I had tremendous problems on the domestic front. I was literally involved 6 to 7 days a week for years. I have spent very little time with my family, but I am committed to finding a way to resolve this problem.

I hope that in the next year I will be more successful in playing a bigger role at home. The dilemma is that this is also the most crucial period in SA. By way of an analogy, it is like digging for gold and being a few centimetres away, then saying that my back is hurting and give up. Many comrades have made many sacrifices. Collectively that brought us to this moment. On the other end, I also need to lead my own life. ☆