

Samwu and 20 years of municipal worker struggle

In October the South African Municipal Workers Union celebrates its 20th anniversary. **John Mawbey** tells the story of municipal workers' organisation, and of Samwu's important struggles to establish rights and better wages and working conditions.

A LONGER SHADOW

In commemorating 20 years of the South African Municipal Workers Union (Samwu) we also remember the longer history of municipal workers' struggle. We are still fighting for the eradication of the bucket system in many areas. This reminds us of the Johannesburg 'bucket boys' strike of 1918. A large number were sentenced under the Masters and Servants Act to work at their own jobs under armed guard and threats of being shot or flogged if they tried to run away. Their strike sparked wider protest against pass laws.

We must also remember the Cape Town Municipal Workers Association (CTMWA) and the Durban Indian Municipal Employees Society (Dimes) established in 1928 and 1935. There is much in their history that we might prefer to forget. Each in its own way co-opted. Yet in the late 1950s we see Dimes affiliating to Sactu (South African Congress of Trade Unions) for a short while, and in the early 1960s CTMWA is clearly democratising and shifting leftwards.

Then there is the place of

municipal workers in the 1973 Durban strikes. The strikes were a wave moving through Durban's industrial areas. It was on 5 February when municipal workers took to the streets that it entered its most dramatic movement. The strikes invaded the city centre and became a problem for the City Council. In the next days most services ceased as African and Indian workers stopped work. In the market workers laughed as white volunteers and police did the manual labour. More police, in camouflage clothing, were drafted from Pretoria. It was in the wake of these strikes that a new brand of unionism emerged in Durban. One was the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) which through its municipal sector played an important role in launching Samwu.

The Johannesburg strike of 1980 links to the formation of Samwu. We remember it for the repressive response of the City Council and the forced bussing of 1 400 dismissed migrant workers to their 'homelands'; and some to the wrong destinations. The strike was ignited by the Black Municipal

Workers Union (BMWU) which was formed to resist the sweetheart, Johannesburg Municipal Workers (UJMW). Under pressure from workers the BMWU first brought out the Orlando Power station workers. It completely misjudged the Council. It had in mind a gentle nudge but it turned into a confrontation with the dismissal of the Orlando workers on the first day. The strike escalated to the whole workforce. It lasted for a week before workers were forced back to work or bussed out under police guard.

In the aftermath the BMWU split with one faction under PAC and black consciousness leadership breaking away to form another union. There were also problems of donor money going missing. The BMWU in 1982 lost its leader Joe Mavi in a car accident. It then became the Municipal and General Workers Union of South Africa (MGWUSA) and was part of the merger talks. Before completion of talks it merged with the Natal based Municipal Workers Union of South Africa. CTMWA commented that "selective merging is not in the comradely spirit required."

LAUNCH AND EARLY YEARS

Samwu owes much to the CTMWA which was the centre from which it grew in its formative years. The unions that formed Samwu came from different traditions, and from different regional contexts.

The unregistered unions were in contact with Sactu and affiliates of the UDF (United Democratic Front) – both close to the ANC. This did



Striking workers from the Black Municipal Workers Union being deported to the Lebowa Bantustan in 1980

not mean they responded similarly. The Eastern Cape unions accepted the Sactu position that unity was paramount, the ex-MGWUSA segment of Municipal Workers Unions of South Africa (MWUSA) however adopted militant, unaccountable and divisive stances on a variety of issues. For them adopting the Freedom Charter was non-negotiable, whereas for Saawu (South African Allied Workers Union) in East London it was “wrong to force other people to adopt the Freedom Charter, and in fact we were also advised (by Sactu) that we should not force them. It should come as a process of education to other workers and other officials.”

This same core of Johannesburg ‘MGWUSA’ officials persisted in their rebellious stance after Samwu was formed. It ignored rules that subscriptions must be deposited in the national account. It refused to account to the Johannesburg union’s structure. During the month-long Soweto strike of 1988 they isolated the rest of the union, its general secretary and president. Publicly the union offered assistance but in the NEC there were critical comments on the

conduct and leadership of the strike.

The final straw came in early 1990 when the ‘MGWUSA’ group announced the creation of a Johannesburg Branch and dismissed NEC objections. The union ended up dismissing three officials from MGWUSA/MWUSA and one from TGWU. The dismissed bussed a large group of workers to Cape Town to invade an NEC and demand reinstatement. It backfired when workers realised they had been misled. When we celebrate 20 years we must reflect that unity is fragile when worker officials are more concerned with imposing their views than building unity.

The launching congress directed Samwu to apply strict approaches to building worker organisation. As the general secretary John Ernstzen said at the union’s third congress in 1991: “We do not just claim worker support. We build and prove it. We do not claim more than we have achieved. Also we do not just impose ourselves on workers.”

He might have added that establishing worker led democratic structures is profoundly political in that it allows membership rather than leadership to be the final

arbiters of the union’s fate. The union is an ongoing battle to sustain democracy.

BREAKING OUT – 1990

The growing membership of Samwu greeted the 1990 arrival of transition to democracy with widespread strikes over wages, recognition and racist supervision. In total 53 475 workers participated. There was a strike in Nelspruit over recognition and an attempted protest march over privatisation which was stopped by police. Workers in Lingulethu West (Kayalitsha) struck over wages, then again over recognition and late in the year over the attitude of the Black Local Authority councillors to an attack by ‘comrades’ on workers in a Combi. The Council said it could do nothing for the injured because the kombi was insured and the workers weren’t. Workers decided the councillors must go.

It was the city strikes which caught the lime light. There were two-week strikes in Pretoria and Port Elizabeth. There was a one-day stoppage by many workers of all races in Durban. It is however the strike by 6 000 to 9 000 workers in Cape Town that was the most

intense and filled with historic meaning.

It was the first strike by Cape Town workers. It included blue and white collar workers, and its scale has never been repeated in subsequent strikes. On the first two days 9 000 workers occupied the concourse of the Civic Centre, bringing business to a halt. When interdicted, and blocked by police, they used St George's Cathedral and other churches to congregate. The union arranged an alternative venue at the City Park Stadium in Athlone. Workers who had never used the words before, shouted "Amandla!" and "Viva!".

The strike had not come from nowhere. It rested on the work done in democratising the CTMWA and was preceded in 1987 by the 'dustmen's' work to rule in which for six weeks they took their time and stuck to their formal eight-hour working day with breaks, as opposed to their normal basis of 'job and finish' on the run. This action caught the union leadership by surprise. Not so in 1990 when it was union initiated.

All of these strikes were unprotected. All of the city managers showed remarkable restraint in not issuing threats of dismissal. Not so in towns such as Delmas, Barberton and Ellisrus where mass dismissals left workers out of work for many months.

FACING THE NEW SOUTH AFRICA

Samwu in the early 1990s was the fastest growing union in Cosatu (Congress of South African Trade Unions) and the country. Other public sector unions were still grappling with a lack of legal foothold and a slow moving state. Municipal workers had the advantage of falling under the LRA (Labour Relations Act) even if denied the right to strike.

From 1987 with 15 000 members,

it reached 30 000 by the end of 1989, and by the end of 1990 had doubled its membership to 60 000. By 1995 it had reached over 100 000. This growth was a product of recruitment and mergers. The most important mergers were with Dimes in Natal and two unions in Johannesburg, one was the UJMW that was set up as a sweetheart union in 1989 to head off independent unionisation.

INDUSTRIAL BARGAINING

A part of the reason for this rapid growth was the union's decision to join the Industrial Councils. There were two types of Industrial Councils - in-house arrangements in cities, and two provincial councils that covered smaller towns, one for the Cape Province and one for the other three provinces of the time. This approach was to be pioneered by the Natal Region of Samwu.

The reasoning was that although these bodies were established to exclude or co-opt Samwu they could be used to the union's advantage if at minimum the union could secure basic organisational rights as a pre-requisite for entry. With stop-order rights the union was quickly able to establish an industrial presence. Future strikes would not be conducted by small groups of vulnerable workers. As the local government transition unfolded, Samwu used the space to establish an informal national forum and then centralised bargaining through the South African Local Government Bargaining Council.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT RESTRUCTURING

From 1990 the union was caught up in local government restructuring issues. It supplied the people to represent Cosatu in the National Local Government Negotiating Forum in 1993 which developed the framework and

legislation for the three stage transition to democratic local government. It was critical in enlightening alliance parties about the need to create effective organised local government. It was the driving force behind rationalising training and created rules to manage the complex issues of merging the many black and white local authority administrations.

It however quickly found itself in conflict with the ANC government over the issue of privatisation as the ANC, Sanco (SA National Civic Organisation) and many in Cosatu moved away from the strong anti-privatisation stance of the early alliance. In the old days privatisation was condemned as unilateral restructuring. Suddenly it was encouraged because the liberation forces were in power and would regulate its effects.

Samwu was the first union to be labelled 'ultra left' by Minister Vally Moosa at a Salga (South African Local Government Association) conference in 1987. Later, as tension rose between Cosatu and government over the "jobs massacre" the label was applied more liberally.

Government and Salga set up units to promote privatisation. They gave no support to Samwu's appeals to involve workers in alternative initiatives to restructure municipal service delivery. Samwu fought a high profile struggle to oppose aspects of privatisation, notably in its unsuccessful campaign to stop Johannesburg's e-Goli plan and the privatisation of water in Nelspruit. In the early 1990s the union, as with other public sector unions, pushed back the widespread employment of casuals.

WAGES AND CONDITIONS

Samwu forced substantial improvements in the minimum



Workers gather during their 1990 wage strike in Cape Town.

wages of municipal workers in the 1990s.

After the 1990 strikes there was a lull. In the Cape the union even used the compulsory arbitration route, but with limited success.

In 1992 the union went on its first national strike. It was national because it was a coordinated campaign, as the site of negotiation remained in provincial divisions of Industrial Councils in each city. It was preceded by public balloting of workers, despite having no right to strike. Workers stayed out between one and five days depending on the outcome of their site of negotiation.

In 1993 this was followed by a sustained strike in the Transvaal. Wages in 1990 varied from as little as R200 a month in some rural towns to an average of R750 in cities with a high of R870 in Cape Town. In the five years to 1995 most minimum rates were doubled though it was off a low base. In these ten years government figures show a narrowing of the wage gap in a city such as Port Elizabeth from 1:19.9 to 1:9.4. This was before the era of contracted municipal managers, and of scarce skilled black

managers demanding excessive pay. Before the times when social commitment faded from the managerial classes. From 2000 wage increases were held back.

The strike which lasted for two and a half weeks in July 2002 was the first truly national municipal strike. The union had achieved centralised bargaining in 1998. In geographic terms it was the most widespread strike until the recent public sector strike. From Mussina Bay to Cape Agulhas and from Richards Bay to Port Nolloth workers downed tools.

It was however to be a wake-up call to workers about the nature of their new employer. The two weeks produced a stalemate. Workers hoped that a few days out would nudge Salga into concessions. The public and press quickly picked up on the excesses of municipal manager wages and treated the strike with some sympathy. The president was angered by the trashing of Durban's streets in the midst of the launch of the African Union, and the Minister of Defence threatened to draft in the army to protect cleaning sub-contractors.

Salga, led by an ex-trade unionist as chief negotiator was intransigent and dismissive and broke off negotiations for long periods. It started with a political slap in the face for Samwu by entering into a separate agreement with Imatu (Independent Municipal and Allied Trade Union). History is not always a march forward, there is also reaction.

In late 1994 and early 1995 Salga tried to retreat from the 1998 Organisational Rights Agreement. Only a fight forced them to reinstate these rights. In 1995 wage negotiations again lead to a dispute. The difference was that Imatu also refused to sign, and lent its support to the first day of Samwu's strike. This was progress. We will not repeat the principles on which Samwu was founded, but whether it be non-racial unity or union independence, we still have many struggles left for the future. LB

John Mawbey heads the Organising and Development Department in the South African Municipal Workers Union (Samwu).