

Samwu: local is lekker

*While all eyes are focused on the public service negotiations, what is happening at a local government level? The **Labour Bulletin** spoke to **Dale Forbes** about Samwu's approach towards collective bargaining.*

Labour Bulletin: *Samwu is currently tied into a three-year wage deal with the SA Local Government Association (Salga) in terms of an agreement struck within the bargaining council. What does the union feel about long-term agreements?*

Dale Forbes: The three-year deal was agreed to as part of an attempt to resolve the strike in 2002. From an organisational point of view the union is not happy with such a long-term agreement as it could lead to the demobilisation of members. The union has however, been fortunate as there have been a number of issues which have been the subject of negotiations during this period.

Labour Bulletin: *Is the union still supportive of centralised bargaining and the current bargaining council system?*

Dale Forbes: Last year Salga, as employer party to the bargaining council, threatened to withdraw from the council (which would mean its collapse) after the union challenged the proposed introduction of an amendment to the council's constitution. The constitutional amendment sought to exclude those entities which have been commercialised (privatised) by the City

of Johannesburg. We want to, in fact, broaden the scope of the council to cover all privatised entities which have sought to bypass bargaining council structures. The union has lodged a dispute with the CCMA around the scope of the council. This move reflects the unions' support for centralised bargaining and the existence of a bargaining council. Such a structure has benefited the union. It is through the bargaining council that the union has been able to conclude a range of agreements covering workers across all municipalities both in the urban and rural areas. We have a single unified employer and all councils have to belong to the employer organisation which makes implementation far easier.

If Salga threatens to collapse the council as it did last year we do not have any real legal recourse. However, such a move by a quasi-government institution would have implications for the effective implementation of government's labour market policies. It would send a message to the private sector that if government's own structures are not prepared to comply with the law, why should they?

Labour Bulletin: *What are the unions' future challenges around collective bargaining?*

Dale Forbes: We have an ongoing struggle to reduce the wage gap and try and put in place some sort of job evaluation system so as to address disparities created by the old apartheid system.

Labour Bulletin: *What are the current issues being negotiated within the bargaining council?*

Dale Forbes: There are a number of critical issues being negotiated including the consolidation of medical aid schemes in the sector as well as the consolidation of a number of pension funds operating in local authorities and municipalities.

Labour Bulletin: *How do you feel the local government Seta is operating?*

Dale Forbes: Salga has put unskilled people into the Seta which has resulted in the institution operating at a very basic level. There has been some discussion as to whether the union should withdraw from the Seta. The current problems in the Seta would only be exacerbated if the labour minister's plans to merge Setas go ahead.

Forbes is the collective bargaining co-ordinator for the SA Municipal Workers Union (Samwu).