

merger is the definition of what unity actually means. Most commentators seem to equate organisational merger with unity. Those who know what actually happens inside organisations will confirm the amount of disunity and lack of solidarity that is prevalent in many bodies. What this disunity in unified bodies means is that while coming together organisationally can facilitate solidarity, organisational mergers are not equal to unity. Whether the merger of Fedusa, Nactu and Consawu will lead to joint action amongst affiliates in similar sectors and between different affiliates is something that cannot be read from the decision to merge and establish a new body in July 2006.

The third area where there has been little comment, is the proposed timetable towards the merger. According to the three organisations, modalities such as producing a draft constitution and policies are to be concluded in February 2006. Discussions within individual organisations are to ensue right up to the end of July 2006 when the new federation will be launched.

Anyone who is familiar with unity talks will appreciate how ambitious the merger timetable is. The unity talks that led to the establishment of Cosatu took four years, with major deadlocks and walkouts along the way. Then there is the work of welding together affiliates that organise in the same sector and who previously were part of different federations and were competitors. This work of bringing affiliates into the same sector can take years after the formal merger. While one does not want to be a prophet of doom, a six-months timetable looks

overly optimistic.

The fourth area missing from commentary is the failure to identify emerging schisms in the post-1994 labour market. While skill and racial division persists, the division between permanent and contract workers also entrenches the old fissures within the working class. In some sectors the divide between permanent and contract workers is the dominant means of cheapening labour. It is mostly contract and other vulnerable workers who are outside the labour movement. According to government's Labour Market Review 2004, only 2,9-million workers out of 9,3-million employees were union members in September 2003. These figures suggest a union density of 32%. This is lower in some sectors. Only 21 000 of South Africa's 1,2-million domestic workers are trade union members. Union density in agriculture and construction is 7,9% and 14,4%, respectively.

It is labour's task to bring these unorganised workers into trade unions. For discussions on mergers not to be a mere shuffling of chairs on the deck, such initiatives should be geared towards unionisation of workers who presently find themselves outside of unions. Unfortunately, the statements about the merged union centre are about pulling together resources, political lobbying and administrative efficiencies. Not much is said about organising the unorganised and that is where the proof of the pudding lies.

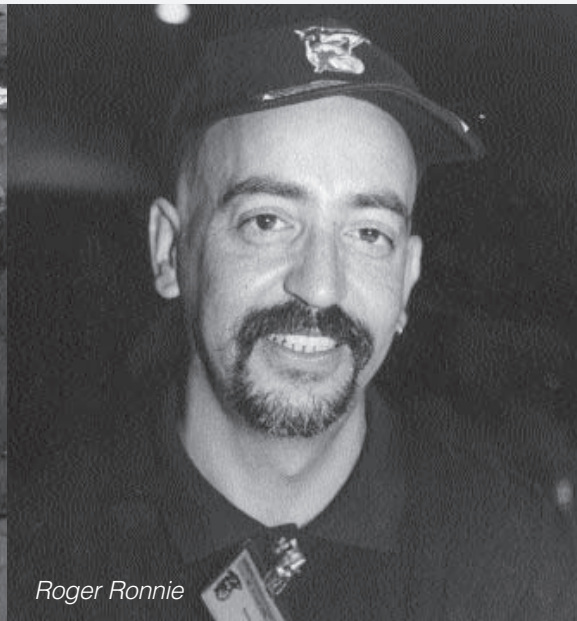
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# Samwu:



At a recent SALB workshop trade unionists expressed a desire to know more about what other unions are doing. In this issue we look at the South African Municipal Workers Union (Samwu). *South African Labour Bulletin* interviewed **Roger Ronnie**, the general secretary of Samwu to find out about the union and challenges it faces.

# the union where municipal workers gather



Roger Ronnie

### **Who does Samwu organise?**

We organise workers all around the country in local government who are employed by the state as well as privately. This includes workers in municipalities, in water boards, and in private companies where municipal services have been outsourced.

Between Imatu (Independent Municipal Association of Trade Unions) and Samwu 90% of local government workers have been organised. The recruitment in recent times of workers in privatised local government services has been rapid. Samwu has about 120 000 members whilst Immatu has about 85 000 members.

In recent years in line with its neo-liberal Gear (Growth, Employment and Redistribution) policies, government froze posts.

Employment in such areas as refuse collection, the cutting of grass verges, sweeping, maintenance of roads and sewerage systems was downscaled, and the outsourcing of municipal services began. No skills audit took place and government cut back on further employment at the very point that it was hoping to extend municipal services to a broader range of areas.

At the same time, government embarked on restructuring municipalities into business units which meant employing more managers. The union has recruited these managers and they are part of the bargaining unit. This has brought new challenges for the union. They are demanding 'high maintenance' members but those in the union who would rather they were not part of the bargaining unit, were defeated.

### **Where do you bargain?**

Samwu made a decision in 1988 to enter the Industrial Council (now Bargaining Council) for local government workers when it had about 16 000 members. It bargains for its municipal members in a single national forum. This is a challenge because municipalities are unequal in their resources. Smaller councils have a smaller tax base so Samwu has to play a delicate balancing act when bargaining wages.

It bargains together with Imatu on the SA Local Government Council (SALGC). The employer party is the SA Local Government Association (Salga). Here they bargain real wages, benefits and framework agreements around non-wage issues. There is the flexibility for regional divisions of the Council to decide how best to

apply these agreements.

An understanding exists on the council that in order to reach an agreement there must be a two thirds majority. Thus an agreement is adopted if either the two unions agree, or if one union and the employer party agree. There are times when Samwu believes it makes sense to side with the employer. Samwu and government agreed, for example, on the establishment of a national retirement fund whilst Imatu, which was still wanting to preserve retirement benefits from the old days, was blocking a national scheme.

Samwu has initiated the creation of a statutory bargaining council to negotiate for Water Board workers. Employers on Water Boards are not willing to bargain nationally and are resisting the national body. As the formation of a statutory council needs to be consensual the union is adopting a compromise position at present.

Employers are willing to take part in a national bargaining forum as long as Samwu does not push the issue of wages, which the union will continue to negotiate with each Water Board. The smaller Water Boards fear that they will have to accommodate large wage hikes, which they do not have the resources for. Samwu has however argued that they can apply for an exemption. Larger Water Boards are also resisting because it does not suit them to negotiate nationally, and they fear the consolidation of union power. Employers have however agreed to national organising rights around such things as shop steward representation, stop-order facilities, access rights and so on.

Samwu also bargains in private companies such as the Water and

Sanitation Service where we have established a national bargaining forum consisting of the Eastern and Western Cape and KwaZulu Natal.

### *What are the main challenges the union faces?*

#### INTERNAL CHALLENGES

The first challenge we face is an internal one. We have participated in an organisational review process. Our 2003 Congress adopted a resolution on this in order for the union to respond to a changing environment, stagnation, and the lack of response to new challenges. We needed to look at becoming more innovative, responsive, fluid and to address the skills base in the union and deployment of financial resources.

We needed to work out why so many people in the union were leaving to go into local government, and what would make their environment more conducive to stay. We looked at study loans, new technologies. We developed clear job descriptions, looked at wages, did job evaluations, and at upward movement in unions which would also be related to salaries. With staff we clearly defined what was expected of them, and found out what training and skills gaps existed.

We went through this process internally and covered constitutional and administration structures. We set up objectives which we hope to reach by congress next year. It has made a difference. There were functions that were duplicated. We are also setting up a member-by-member register with all the member's details, and we're mapping the training of shop stewards.

We have conducted an audit of equipment in branches in order to

assess which offices need refurbishing.

We have a staff of 122 people with 3-4 branches in each province. The branches are staffed by office bearers. Many of our 77 full-time municipal shop stewards work in union offices which means we have to manage them as staff. In some cases their skills may exceed that of organisers and this can create a tension with organisers feeling undermined. There is an unevenness so we are trying to bring organisers up to the same level and manage a proper programme of training.

We have decided not to fill all our organiser posts and to more fully explore what role shop stewards can play. It is difficult to attract skilled people at our rate of pay so we leave the posts empty. Shop stewards are still major drivers of campaigns, and organisers have to give support to shop stewards.

We have developed a staff management manual which deals with issues such as discipline and grievance with all procedures, performance appraisal, procedures for job applications for internal and external applicants and so on. We have also developed a finance admin manual.

Staff's rights and obligations are now clearer and we have introduced a job evaluation system together with comprehensive job descriptions. Staff know what is expected of them and it feels that there is a greater interest in the organisation since the introduction of the evaluation system. It's brought a greater focus and is eliminating unevenness.

#### EXTERNAL CHALLENGES

We are also facing external challenges. The Local Government Transition Act has been a major



challenge. There has been a battle around service delivery and the extent to which we can intervene in service delivery issues. We are not only a wage union, we look at the relationship between wages and service delivery and health and safety. Workers' conditions are linked directly to services they can deliver.

The Municipal Systems Act provides for a full investigation when municipalities want to upgrade services. Where government wants to bring in an external provider, it must do a cost/benefit analysis and take into account the views of trade unions and the local community. Issues should be brought to the Bargaining Council and we should then negotiate a framework agreement. In order to do this we must build technical expertise and understand reports from consultants. We need to engage with Naledi to assist in this analysis especially as government holds the view that engaging in restructuring issues is not our role. We want to be proactive as much as reactive.

We need to develop proposals for the sector as a whole around such things as skills, democratic decision-making and community participation. A series of processes around community participation have been adopted at Nedlac and at Bargaining Council level. Now we need to take this forward in ways that, for example, allow for more resources to go to community forums and towards making Ward

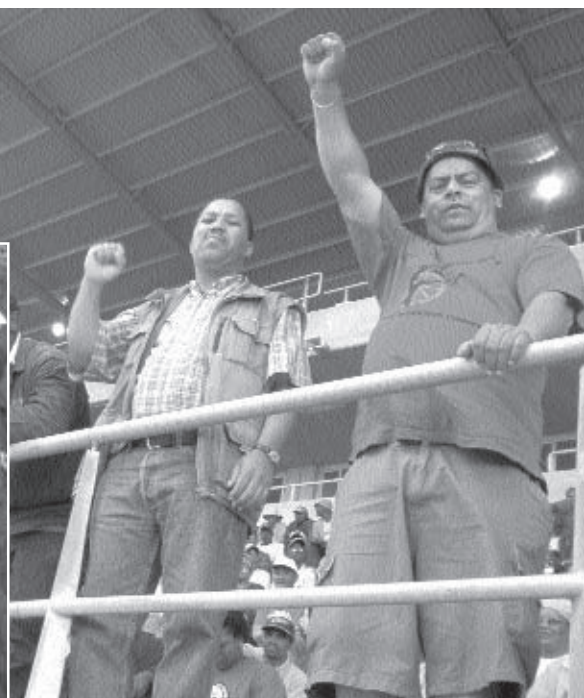


Councils work better. At present Ward Councils are peopled almost solely by individuals sympathetic to government. We need communities to engage around their needs so that we know when the best time is for meetings, that notices go up of such meetings and so on.

The biggest challenge is to ward off conventional wisdoms from government such as that it has limited resources. We need to dispel this idea. We should look at savings around servicing the apartheid debt, tax rebates which go elsewhere and not into developing our communities, or we should develop a form of compulsory saving on cuts on interest rates which could go into a public fund.

Government restructuring is framed within a liberal paradigm. We need to develop the internal capacity to critique its proposals. It is important that these proposals must be understood and supported by our members and guided by national congress resolutions.

We must also work with other agencies to build our capacity such as the Municipal Services Project.



Government always sees privatisation as the easiest route but this is becoming more complex now that many big multinationals are starting to withdraw from developing countries. The notion of full cost recovery and sustainable entities is still being pushed so workers are under the same pressures. The state is using the same modus operandi as private companies such as cut off points for water delivery and so on. We are worried that it is doing this so it can put these local services out for sale in the future.

There are real problems with contracting out. We can see with Piki Tup, for example, which maintained a core of permanent workers from Jo'burg City Council as well as newly contracted workers. Piki Tup has subcontracted in turn to local entrepreneurs, which has led to a subsequent lowering of work conditions. There is no protective clothing, wages are low.

These are the dangers of privatisation. Workers find themselves in a less favorable position and services to communities drop. We start getting efficiencies from City Power which was set up as a private company and now we experience many more black outs. All these workers need



to be brought directly into the Council.

#### GETTING TO THE BASE

One of our challenges is trying to ensure that more information goes to the union base. We want to produce a regular newsletter and we produce Workers News which is a quarterly publication in five languages.

We are setting up participative research projects where shop stewards are involved and bring their daily experiences to the research. We have a national restructuring committee which organises campaigns, marches and makes media such as stickers and pamphlets.

We are running foundation shop steward programmes where shop stewards go through a local government restructuring model in a two day course. This is accompanied by a resource manual for shop stewards in the workplace.

We are strengthening shop steward councils which meet in each municipality on a monthly basis and we have branch shop stewards councils every quarter. They are well attended as we have negotiated progressive time-off rights and have a full-time shop steward for every 1 000 members.

Full-time shop stewards do not get special benefits. They remain on the same grade with the same rate

of pay. Sometimes you have to be careful of what you wish for. We had to dismiss a full-time shop steward who was also taking a salary from the bargaining forum and was hence receiving two salaries. These stewards get time off during work hours and then they don't attend meetings. We need to deal with this as a management issue.

#### *What was your position on Cosatu's support for Jacob Zuma?*

We have strong views in the union on the issue of corruption as it has also not left our own organisation untouched. We have been cleaning up our organisation over the last two years. There have been dismissals and suspensions of members and organisers. It is a principle we would defend.

We also believe it is important to build maximum unity amongst our members and we feared the Zuma issue would be divisive. We argued this at the Cosatu Central Committee. But in the end we are bound by the majority decision of Cosatu's affiliates.

#### *Give us some background to the strike this year*

In the 2002 bargaining round we had a national strike that ended in a three year bargaining agreement. But in fact the union would prefer annual negotiations. We believe it is

the most important bargaining activity in the union. Wage negotiations keep the union alive. We also don't know what the rate of inflation is going to be in a few years time, and we have been concerned about the oil crisis.

The three year wage agreement ended this year and this is what led to the strike. Both Imatu and Samwu came out on a national strike. Recently, although a merger is not on the cards, the two unions have started to work more closely together. For the first time in our wage dispute and strike this year we waged joint actions. The profile of Imatu's workers is rapidly changing. Traditionally Imatu organised the conservative old guard white workers who had a close relationship with employers. Now it has a lot more black members and the culture of the union has changed. It is a lot more independent of the employer body and this makes it possible to stage joint action.

We suspended the strike because we were worried by security force involvement. We thought it may become nasty. However, we reserved the right to negotiate again next year and we did not sign an agreement. The final offer was a 6% increase. Imatu also did not sign. This showed our ability to work together. We are already collecting wage demands for next year as new economic pressures kick in. The constitution of the Bargaining Council states that we can table wage demands annually. We hope that the employers will apply their minds to it.

We came out of the strike stronger, not defeated. If we had signed the agreement we would have felt demoralised. There is no sense amongst workers that Samwu sold out.

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