

Skorokoros, Zola Budds and E-20s

Bulletin: What is taxi recapitalisation and what does it aim to do?

Bokaba: Taxi recapitalisation is the government's programme that hopes to deal with the taxi crisis by replacing the current taxi fleet (16-seaters) with the new 18- and 35-seaters. This takes into consideration the safety of the passengers and implements the Department of Transport's regulation programme outlined in the National Taxi Task Team's (NTTT) recommendations. The programme has many aims. The new regulations will ensure no vehicles are operated illegally. It will minimise the crime in the industry because taxi registrars will register the new taxis. The drivers will also be registered and have the required public driving permits. They will also receive some benefits.

Technology in the new taxis will stop a taxi from being overloaded. The current fleet is more than ten years old because the manufacturers are no longer providing the taxi market with the 16-seater minibuses. Also, they are not roadworthy anymore. The recapitalisation process hopes to address this and come up with an acceptable public transport system. Defective vehicles are one of the major causes of accidents on our roads. The programme will improve the safety of our members who drive those vehicles and that of the passengers.

Etienne Vlok interviews

Maurice Bokaba - SATAWU national organiser: taxi unit.

The taxi industry had also been complaining that all the other transport modes - buses and rail - are being subsidised while it is not, even though it commutes more than 50% of passengers. Now there will be financial assistance for it. With this programme the government can track which routes to subsidise and the industry can tender for those routes. All the subsidies will be accounted for. At present you cannot do this because you cannot control the subsidies.

When the government introduced the recapitalisation project it intended to provide operators with a scrapping allowance that will form the basis of a deposit for a new minibus at the manufacturer. If an operator comes up with his or her skorokoro they can receive the allowance. So you get something in return for your taxi even though it does not have any real value. Operators who are no longer interested to continue, will be encouraged to take the cash as the market is saturated.

The various provinces are busy with the regulation process. Taxi offices have been established around the country. Taxi

registrars are employed to ensure each operator is registered. A standard constitution for operators exists and each taxi body must adopt it before it can participate in the system.

The Department of Transport is attempting to unite the taxi industry. In the past we used to have many taxi associations, which created conflict. At the moment they are trying to unite. In Gauteng they have already launched the Gauteng Taxi Council. In the past, SATAWU did not even know with whom to negotiate. Now it will be easier for us to raise issues of central bargaining.

Bulletin: What is SATAWU's view of the process?

Bokaba: Recapitalisation does not only talk about the vehicles. It also addresses the question of formalisation, subsidies and labour standards. It is a broad package that emanated from the NTTT's recommendations. That is why we support it.

The department's announcement of the programme was addressed to the employers or operators and their associations. The then TGWU was approached by the taxi industry, specifically the South African Taxi Council (SATACO), to ask how we can support them to ensure the process comes up with the desired objectives.

We realised that we had to get NUMSA on board before we could assure the operators of our support. If you talk about the manufacturers in the motor industry you must involve NUMSA. So we prepared a memorandum for the departments of Transport and Trade and Industry with a set of objectives that form the pillars of our support for the recapitalisation. These objectives are affordability of vehicles, employment creation, job losses, human

resource development, black economic empowerment, worker rights, centralised bargaining, development of local industry, the urgency of implementation and compliance with safety standards, labour legislation and minimum standards. Minister Alec Erwin assured us the programme would be underpinned by those objectives.

Bulletin: How will recapitalisation influence taxi drivers?

Bokaba: In our memorandum to the government we mentioned labour standards. Currently, the taxi drivers do not enjoy any benefits. They just wake up and go to work. They can be dismissed any time the operator feels so because of the absence of formal employment contracts binding the employers and employees. The result is many unfair dismissals.

Taxi operators use a system of targets and quotas to remunerate taxi drivers. This encourages drivers to drive at high speed, disregarding the safety of other road users in order to reach the targeted number of passengers.

Under recapitalisation, the system of targets will disappear. Drivers will be working under better conditions and the relationship between the driver and the passengers will improve. Drivers will begin to regard themselves like any worker. Recapitalisation will ensure that, unlike now, taxi drivers' jobs will be guaranteed jobs.

The drivers of the 35-seaters will automatically fall within the bargaining council and be covered by the conditions that are prescribed by wage determination 452 for bus drivers. It covers hours of work, minimum wages, benefits and annual and sick leave. These benefits are currently not applicable in the industry.

In 1999 the Minister of Labour announced his intentions to investigate the conditions of employment in this industry. Last year he held public hearings to get recommendations and input from stakeholders. The Employment Conditions Commission will be writing a report to the minister in the first quarter of this year and we expect the minister to announce the actual minimum standards for the industry before the end of June.

Bulletin: What is the union's role regarding retrenchments during the recapitalisation project?

Bokaba: The reactionary forces use the issue of job losses for their own agendas. It is a legitimate concern but they use it to bring fear to the industry. Job loss is an emotional issue. They mention 40 000 jobs to be lost. However, that allegation is made by subtracting the 80 000 new vehicles from the current fleet of 120 000 without taking into consideration that there are driver-operators, driver-owners and 35-seaters that require two drivers for long distances. It is also unfounded because they do not know how many permanent workers there are. It is difficult for the departments of Transport and Trade and Industry to establish how many people the industry employs because today someone is employed and tomorrow that person is no longer employed.

Those forces are aware that those are only assumptions about the number of job losses. However, they are pushing it for their own agenda because they are threatened by the regulation process as they benefited from the violence in the industry. They know that once we move to this system it would be very difficult for them to continue with their lawless actions.

We are not saying that there will not be

job losses. What we are saying is do a feasibility study to determine how to address job losses if it happens. We have called on the departments of Transport and Labour to investigate the impact of taxi recapitalisation on labour and look at displacement and the social plan. If there are job losses what are we going to do with the displaced workers? We need to discuss a social plan even if we are not yet aware of what is going to happen.

Not each and every current driver will be encouraged to be a driver in the future. If you interview taxi drivers you will find that some drive because they do not have an alternative. These kinds of drivers will be encouraged to take another opportunity. If we have a mechanic depot where the taxis are maintained there can be some kind of training to ensure they get other skills. Then former taxi drivers should be the priority for those jobs should there be any displacement. This is where the social plan comes in. Let us be pro-active so that if this situation comes we know what the alternatives are. We need to investigate which drivers are driving willingly, not just because there is no other option.

We must also take into consideration that the programme itself is going to create employment. Whatever company becomes the manufacturer of the minibuses will have to conform to the local content and a factory will have to be erected. We need to investigate what the actual number of jobs is that will be created by the project.

Bulletin: How many taxi drivers are SATAWU members?

Bokaba: It is so difficult to organise taxi drivers. As you are increasing numbers, you find that some drivers are no longer in the industry because they do not have



Taxi recapitalisation will minimise the crime in the industry.

guaranteed employment. Only some drivers have a lengthy period of employment in the industry. During those early days of the South African Taxi Drivers Union the number was close to 25 000. It then fell to 15 000. SATAWU's last membership audit revealed the number of taxi drivers who are members is close to 6 000.

We launched a membership recruitment campaign in September 2000. Our numbers have increased at the taxi ranks. For example, Johannesburg was never our stronghold but with this recruitment campaign a convincing number of drivers have been enrolled. SATAWU is beginning to command respect at the various taxi ranks.

Bulletin: *Are you planning to set up a national bargaining council for the industry?*

Bokaba: SATAWU is the main organisation recognised by the taxi operators when they want to talk about issues affecting taxi drivers. For example, the Gauteng Taxi Council adopted a resolution saying it will

discuss labour-related issues with us. So we launched the Gauteng Taxi Labour Relations Forum. SATAWU sits in that council as the representative of taxi drivers. This is the early stage of an initiative to bring a bargaining culture into the industry. We know that forum will evolve into a bargaining council soon after the recapitalisation.

SATACO signed a memorandum of agreement with the Department of Transport saying it is the body representing the taxi operators and that it will interact with the department directly. SATACO is still an interim body and will have formal elections and a permanent structure when provincial structures are established.

Soon after the launch of SATACO we convened a meeting with the executive and told them what our objectives are. Our strategy is to engage the various provinces and build relationships with them. Then when they form the national council we can import the progress from the various provinces and have a proper national forum to deal with labour issues.

Bulletin: Why should drivers become members?

Bokaba: There are a lot of benefits. Apart from the broader picture, there is the fact that the minister is investigating employment conditions in the industry because of SATAWU. SATAWU was the one driving this formalisation and democratisation process from the onset.

In the forums we let the employers know that they employ people. We sensitise them about their employees. A few years back it was a strange thing to tell a taxi operator that a driver is someone. To him a driver is nothing. With the launch of our taxi membership campaign we also engaged the employers.

Victimisation is still rife but some taxi associations are beginning to be cautious when dealing with employees. Cases of unfair labour practises and organisational rights are being referred to the CCMA. We are making gains in those instances. We see it as our duty but we also use it as incentive for new members.

Bulletin: What are the employers' views of the recapitalisation project?

Bokaba: They are divided. Recapitalisation will change the image of the industry. Some employers were involved in the establishment of the NTTT and understand the recommendations of the government. However, some employers benefited from the informality and violence in the industry. They instil fear among the operators by saying recapitalisation will cause problems. Their purpose is to destabilise. But I don't think they are making progress.

The provincial governments are assisting the employers to build democratic structures. Before the end of February all the provinces' taxi councils

should have been launched and then there should be national structures.

Bulletin: Why has the process been delayed and when will it be completed?

Bokaba: The Department of Trade and Industry appointed a project team to run with the investigation. The team consisted of SATACO, the departments of Trade and Industry and Transport and other role-players. SATAWU and NUMSA were not part of it. We are not concerned with the details of the investigation. As an employee organisation we are interested only in the objectives laid out in our memorandum.

The reasons the process has been delayed are the problems encountered by that project team. After it visited the companies bidding to manufacture the new taxis late last year Minister Alec Erwin disbanded it. The government then announced that the target date for the recapitalisation had changed. Now the Department of Trade and Industry is controlling the process. The only problem we have is that they have been running with it very quietly. We met with them to check what was the way forward but we were told that the department wanted to run it internally. We do not have a problem per se, because all we need is for our objectives to be met and for there to be information flow. That is why SATAWU is calling for a credible consultative forum that can monitor and co-ordinate this process. We wrote a letter to the Department of Transport and the Minister of Trade and Industry calling for such a forum. Another problem has been internal friction in the interim SATACO. This caused setbacks, which led the department to run it alone.

The National Transport Transitional Act suggests recapitalisation be completed in four years. ★