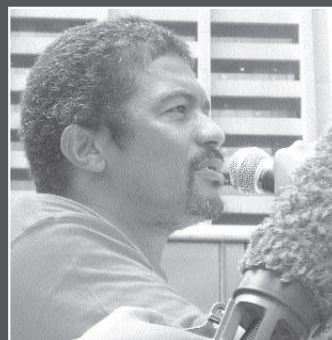


A Striking Union

The South African Transport & Allied Workers Union



The South African Transport & Allied Workers Union (Satawu) is the largest transport union in the country. Its ranks are further swelled by vulnerable cleaning and security workers. It is known for its bold strikes in all its sectors. Kally Forrest interviewed its general secretary **Randall Howard** to find out more about this feisty union.

Randall Howard, the general secretary of Satawu, has been a trade unionist for most of his life.

He was born in 1961 in Bonteheuwel in Cape Town but grew up and schooled in Greenhaven as the second eldest in a family of 14 children. His mother worked in a clothing factory and his father amongst other things worked on a fishing trawler. He completed matric and then had no option but to work to support his large family.

He was employed at SA

Container Depots (SACD) in 1986 and helped workers organise clandestinely for Transport & General Workers Union (TGWU). SACD stored empty and full containers and drivers would collect and deliver cargo. Here African and coloured workers battled for recognition which they finally achieved. He soon rose to become chair of the shop stewards committee.

Howard recalls "beginning to understand the power of mandating and worker unity" and of using the industry strategically to increase worker power. "We staged illegal wildcat action. On Fridays, for example, we would deliberately hold an overlong general (union) meeting. A huge queue of trucks would back up outside the gates of the depot. This would put pressure on employers to deal with our grievances."

A tough working class Irish depot manager, a Mr Finnegan, particularly got under Howard's skin. "He called us 'kaffirs' and would even pick up workers by their ears. He was a huge guy. He swore at people and had no respect for black workers." As the union grew in power it exposed Finnegan's abuse to national management. In time, "We had complete control of the depot. It was a roller coaster for me this environment. I knew that this was my destiny. I started going out with the union organiser Nomonde Ngumane to organise workers at other companies. The company

could do nothing about my absence."

By this time Howard had been elected chair of the Western Cape Branch of TGWU and was beginning to outgrow SACD. A blessing in disguise came in 1988. Management had long wanted to get rid of him. Over time it built up a case against him and then dismissed him. SACD workers staged a two day national strike in protest which resulted in arbitration. "I was defiant in the face of authority – insubordinate, a nonconformist. This is how the arbitrator correctly described me. And so I was dismissed which was the best thing for me."

In 1988 he was elected TGWU second vice president and regional treasurer of Cosatu so the union was keen to keep this evident leader. When a position came up he became an organiser in the Western Cape Branch. On Tuesdays he would arrive at BEC (Branch Executive Committee) meetings in soccer gear and leave early for practice. One day the executive told him to put away his soccer boots and focus on the union. "It was an instruction, I listened and it was the end of my dream of becoming a soccer star."

At the 1989 TGWU Congress he was elected assistant general secretary and Nathi Nhleko, general secretary. Laughs Howard, "These two green young men from the coast came to head office in Johannesburg. We knew nothing but we were passionate and we

worked hard. I have been accused of being bureaucratic. But I think it's important to have an eye for detail and to drive delivery. Union staff must deliver to workers."

In 1993 Nhleko left to become an ANC parliamentarian and Howard became the union's general secretary.

THE UNION'S SECTORS

In 2000 TGWU merged with Sarwhu (SA Railway & Harbour Workers Union) in line with Cosatu's principle of 'one union one industry'. The merged union, Satawu, was divided into nine sectors. These were road freight, passenger transport (including buses and taxis), maritime, civil aviation, transport infrastructure (including toll gates and parking garages), motor ferry, rail, cleaning and security.

Since then it has grown to become a union of 87 000 with 60 000 transport members, and 27 000 members in the contract cleaning and security sectors.

SECURITY SECTOR

The contract security industry is currently very much in the public's mind having waged a hard fought 12 week strike in June and July (see pages 4 to 11). According to Howard, "There's a lot of experience in this sector as we have been organising security guards since the 1970s. It has some very good and experienced shop stewards. The strike was widely supported and there was amazing unity. It's a vulnerable sector, high risk work, low wages, lack of social benefits. Employers have not crossed the Rubicon to lift the industry out of this state. It doesn't reward workers."

Various challenges for the union have emerged from the strike. Firstly, it aims to establish a national bargaining council for the sector. A

national bargaining forum exists but agreements made cannot be extended to unorganised workers.

The union also confronts the problem of too many unions with too few members operating in the sector. About 300 000 guards work in the sector but there is only a 16% union density. "We want to engage with the Department of Labour (DoL) on how it is too easy to register a union. All these small unions frustrate Satawu. Collective bargaining becomes impossible, all the posturing. Satawu is the dominant union and we have to give leadership in the sector. We want to engage with the DoL and the CCMA to take the acrimony out of bargaining."

In the wake of the strike the union has made many organisational gains as unorganised workers, and members from other unions, have crossed over to Satawu. It's a trend the union hopes to capitalise on.

The union also aims to restructure the bargaining process. Comments Howard, "We can't go on bargaining for six months and then go into a dispute process. We must be able to move more quickly." The union has used the LRA Section 77 (society interest) dispute procedure at Nedlac in order to examine non-compliance by employers with the Security Industry Determination; regulation of the industry; the risk to national security of a chaotic security sector; the tender system; training and the idea of a charter for the industry.

Howard explains that it is a highly competitive industry, which operates on tenders. Cutting wages and non-compliance with the Security Determination is the industry's way of cutting costs. "It's a race to the bottom," remarks Howard. The union does not have access to private contracts so it cannot negotiate or challenge



working conditions that are laid out in these agreements. It aims to engage the DoL on this problem so that all contracts have to comply with basic wages and conditions.

Another challenge for the union is job security. Contracts are short term (under five years) so workers can become redundant when the contract ends. These short periods of work also make it difficult for workers to accumulate decent retirement benefits. Sometimes the union is able to get the security company to talk to the new client and to persuade them to take on old workers. But in this process there are dangers. At times a company, such as Springbok Fidelity, agrees to redeploy workers to new contracts but their salaries go down.

The union aims to use the Section 77 Nedlac procedure to improve conditions in the industry because as Howard explains, "It's the second largest growing industry in the country after retail and simply cannot be ignored any more."

CLEANING SECTOR

The cleaning sector has much in common with the security industry. The industry operates on a competitive tendering system, which again drives down wages and working conditions. Cleaners' employment is often insecure depending on the length and renewal of contracts. The industry is also characterised by atypical work conditions. Cleaners are often contracted to work for as little as four hours a day. Low working

hours means low wages and also means they do not qualify for benefits.

Like security, cleaners often do night shift work in large office blocks. They are the invisible workers of the night. These unsocial shifts affect their family life and their body rhythms leading to ill-health. Working with toxic cleaning materials also leads to sickness. The union aims to run campaigns around these issues in the future.

Their employers, who are often the same as in the security industry, have a similar attitude to them as security employers to their workers. Cleaners are at the bottom of the pile in terms of work status.

All these factors have driven cleaners into hard bargaining in a national bargaining forum this year. As with security, the union is on a drive to establish a national bargaining council so that improved conditions can be extended to non-union members.

Fourteen unions bargain in the national forum with Satawu being the largest. The union has deadlocked in negotiations with employers over wages and will launch a national strike in the near future (only KwaZulu-Natal will not take part as here Satawu negotiates on a regional bargaining council).

Cleaners earn less than security guards. For an eight hour day they earn R1 484 pm. The Contract Cleaning Sectoral Determination stipulates that workers cannot be hired for less than four hours a day. As many cleaners only work the four hours they earn about R742 a month. Unlike security, where a basic salary is negotiated, cleaners are paid on an hourly basis. Currently wages stand at R8.57 an hour and employers are offering a miserable 23 cents increase to bring the rate to R8.80 or an increase of

R39.83 monthly. In response to the employers' offer of this 5.7% increase, Satawu is demanding a 12 – 15% increase (12% in metropolitan areas and 15% in rural areas where wages lag behind).

The union has also included the cleaning sector in its Section 77 dispute to Nedlac. It wants to see an investigation into the wages and conditions in the industry and also to engage the DoL on how to implement observable minimum standards in the industry.

TRANSPORT SECTOR

The launching of Satawu in 2000 brought transport workers from all sectors together in one union for the first time in South Africa. The transport industry employs around 420 000 workers if the minibuss taxi sector is included. A key challenge since 2000 has therefore been to consolidate and grow the union's transport membership. This has meant focusing on previously unorganised sectors such as taxi workers, as well as campaigning against outsourcing, casualisation and labour brokers. It has also meant expanding the membership base to include previously unrepresented grades, including lower and middle management grades.

A growing and more diverse membership has called for a strengthening of union structures and prioritising internal education, information flow and media output. In the process, women worker leadership has been promoted in line with Satawu policy.

Improving the wages and working conditions of workers through collective bargaining is where much of Satawu's organisational energy is directed. The union has a policy of centralised bargaining and has been

successful in establishing centralised bargaining for the bus, road freight, toll gate, and motor ferry sectors. It is currently campaigning for centralised bargaining in the aviation and maritime sectors.

Satawu takes a strong stand against privatisation, which forms part of a bigger anti-privatisation campaign spearheaded by Cosatu. It has successfully fought off the privatisation of the railways (both national freight as well as metropolitan commuter services) and the privatisation of the ports.

It has also actively engaged with the state-owned Transnet group around privatization and transfer of operations. Earlier this year it waged an impressive and successful strike to force the transport giant to properly consult with the union on its restructuring plans. "We have made it clear that we are not going to allow the state to reduce Transnet to a small holding company and we have won this battle. They now know that they need to consult over workplace transformation and that organised labour works in these places in numbers," says Howard.

The union has also been active in promoting the view that transport infrastructure and operations are critical for economic development, a view increasingly shared by government and civil society.

According to Howard, the union faces two major challenges in the road freight area. "We need to campaign around working hours with a view to safety and improving drivers' working hours and we need to drive up basic wages. Wages still operate on the trip system and this is a contributor to accidents, which costs the country thousands of rands every year." Last year (2005) drivers waged a major national



strike to win higher wages. The strike settlement also extended minimum conditions to workers employed through labour brokers. This was a first for South Africa.

The other major challenge, according to Howard, is to strengthen work in the area of HIV/AIDS. "Drivers have been described as 'AIDS on wheels' as they cross borders, and frequently engage with sex workers." The union has engaged with a number of organisations on the issue and there has been good co-operation with employers in the national Trucking Against AIDS campaign. Wellness clinics are now being launched at truck stops as well as improved recreation facilities and the creation of a friendlier environment at these rest places.

PASSENGER TRANSPORT

The public transport arena has recently been described by the chairperson of the transport portfolio committee in parliament as being in a state of crisis. Trains are overcrowded and face security issues, bus commuters complain of an absence of facilities, and taxi commuters live in fear of accidents and the un-roadworthiness of vehicles, whilst drivers complain

about the absence of facilities at taxi ranks.

"In public transport we face the challenge of helping to put in place an integrated, safe, affordable transport service in black townships as people are dependent on this," comments Howard. In this regard the union supports the state's taxi recapitalisation programme (subject to protections for workers whose jobs may be threatened) and the bringing back of decommissioned trains. "There are many policy issues we want to engage with but unfortunately we lack the capacity. So our challenge is to drive a process and to engage more consistently. With the Gautrain for example we should have engaged more strongly on the idea that those resources should rather go towards buying new rolling stock for Metro Rail."

The bus sector, which is largely in private hands, has a 19% share of the public passenger market. Contracts are currently awarded either through competitive tendering or through negotiated contracts. As with cleaning and security, the competitive tendering system has severely undermined the working conditions of bus workers. The union however

recently negotiated an exciting employer share ownership scheme in one of the bus companies and this initiative may be replicated elsewhere in the country (see p12.)

Finally, as an affiliate of Cosatu, Satawu is active in a number of national workers' campaigns, including the campaign on Jobs and Poverty. The union feels strongly about fighting to shift government economic policy in a direction that will actively promote job creation and wealth redistribution.

As Satawu prepares for its 2nd National Congress in August 2006, Howard comments, "We do so with confidence having grown our membership by more than 20% and having built a powerful and united union that can stand up to employers and government as shown in the Transnet restructuring dispute and the security living wage campaign. We continue to strive for a socialist society and world. In September Satawu, together with our African affiliates, will host the first ever ITF (International Transport Federation) World Congress. Those who wish to see Satawu fail simply cannot wish us away."

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