

# Tackling HIV/AIDS

*SACTWU sets the example*

**N**icholas Dlodla is a machine trainer at the Frame Textile factory in New Germany, outside Durban. He has worked at the factory for 15 years and travels daily from his home in KwaMashu. Dlodla has noticed changes in his work and community environment over the past year or two. People at work are ill and are taking sick leave more often. In his community, people he knew to be well and active are falling ill and being hospitalised and some are dying.

One of his close neighbours, for instance, a talented soccer player with a bright future, is now lying weak in a hospital bed. Dlodla does not expect him to recover. He also does not hesitate to surmise the cause of the changes at work and at home: 'HIV/AIDS is with us, that is for sure'

Dlodla is not alone in his concern. Trade unions around the country are facing the reality of high percentages of their membership being infected with the virus and the various challenges to daily life both in the workplace and the community that this creates.

Federations COSATU, NACTU and FEDUSA recently held a leadership summit on HIV/AIDS and COSATU has been running a comprehensive HIV/AIDS campaign since November last year. After

*SACTWU has often been identified as a union that has a good programme around .. HIV/AIDS. Andrea Meeson investigates.*

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several years of indecisiveness, the South African union movement may well be going into high gear on the issue.

## **SACTWU**

SACTWU is one union that is taking the reality of HIV/AIDS very seriously. SACTWU represents 120 000 members nationally, the vast majority of them poorer women with limited education. Because of this membership profile, SACTWU feels it has a special responsibility to address HIV/AIDS head on.

SACTWU's policy on HIV/AIDS has been long in the development process and will be ratified at its national executive committee meeting in July. According to national education officer, Andre Kriel, unionists, including national office bearers, worker leadership and doctors working in SACTWU-affiliated health care centres, developed the policy. It was circulated on

A joint project between SA Labour Bulletin and the American Center for International Labor Solidarity (ACILS) and sponsored by ACILS

an informal basis and referred to 33 national branches in five regions.

'The consultation process on this particular policy has been extensive and drawn out,' admits Kriel. 'This is because the issue is so sensitive and the prejudices inherent. We could not afford to push through policy without addressing those sensitivities and prejudices. Debate among the membership was critical to getting an informed and credible policy on the table.'

Despite the delays in ratifying the policy, Kriel believes the drafting exercise was a useful one for the union. 'It forced us to take a constitutional, structural decision on the matter, which puts it at the centre of policy decisions of the union.'

Key components of the policy include education, counselling and training, health and safety, care and management of HIV, non-discrimination, confidentiality and testing, and job security. The policy also acknowledges that the industry profile and the geographic locations of the majority of its membership make HIV/AIDS a particularly pertinent issue for the union.

The clothing and textile industries employ many women, and women are additionally at risk of HIV infection. Furthermore, KwaZulu-Natal, where 30% of the SACTWU membership live and work, has the highest level of HIV infection. The Western Cape, where another 30% of membership are located, presently has the lowest level of infection, but the fastest growing epidemic.

## Objectives

The main objectives of the policy are to reduce the number of new infections among employees and their families and to ensure that the rights of employees with HIV are fully respected. It is the latter that Kriel believes deserves special attention: 'The bottom line is that everything is

important when it comes to understanding HIV/AIDS. However, we need to acknowledge that the secrecy and the ignorance that prevails in the workplace and in the communities are the main contributing factors to discrimination. Breaking the silence about HIV/AIDS should be at the top of the agenda.'

## Significant efforts

SACTWU has made significant and tangible efforts to put HIV/AIDS into the spotlight on the union agenda. This year alone, R700 000 has been set aside for training projects and campaigns around HIV/AIDS. This is a significant amount when one considers that the NUM's 2000 budget for similar work is a mere R120 000.

SACTWU is looking to establish a new workplace principle within the clothing and textile sector. The union has launched an aggressive campaign as part of wage demands to secure no less than two hours per month off for HIV/AIDS education for every employee.

Extra training time for shopstewards, over and above the five days annual time-off for union work, is also being put on the table. SACTWU wants that extra training time to be devoted specifically to intensive training around HIV/AIDS with a particular emphasis on the counselling function.

Presently the training requirements are enormous and the task made more daunting by the ever-present battle to secure time-off for training and education. As Kriel explains: 'At the moment we have three full-time education officers at SACTWU, who between them must train 3 500 shopstewards across the country. Simple mathematics will tell you that no less than 72 training weeks would be required to meet that commitment.

'Although employers and employer

bodies have been quite progressive in their approach to the epidemic and have actively made resources available, the bottom line is that there remains a reluctance to grant workers extra time-off because production and profit concerns are paramount.'

### **Creative tactics**

Another creative tactic that SACTWU plans to use is linking HIV/AIDS education and training to the government's broader programme of sector education and training. According to Kriel, SACTWU negotiators will be demanding that HIV/AIDS becomes an integral part of the workplace skills plan in all companies that fall within the clothing and textile sector

As from 1 May, companies are compelled under the Skills Development Act (SDA) to pay an annual levy to the Receiver of Revenue, which amounts to 0,5% of their total payroll, 50% of which can be claimed back depending on the level of skills training offered to their workforce.

According to recent press reports, only 30% of employers have to date registered with the Receiver of Revenue and the Training Act itself presents a minefield of confusing jargon and bureaucratic process both for employers and for the implementing body - the Sector Education and Training Authorities.

Despite the inherent teething problems, SACTWU believes that the SDA offers a bargaining opportunity, whereby a link between HIV/AIDS education and training and the 50% rebate is formally established to compel employers to put HIV/AIDS at the top of the training agenda.

'We are also demanding a link between HIV/AIDS training and the duty certificate, a government benefit specific to exporters in the clothing sector,' says Kriel. 'These employers receive the duty certificate'

from the Department of Trade and Industry on proof of expenditure, amounting to 4% of their annual wage bill, on training. We want to use the existing framework to make HIV/AIDS a training priority.'

### **Employers and centralised bargaining**

Whether these demands will wash with the employers and employer bodies is another question. Although there exists a good degree of co-operation between unions and employer bodies within the textile and clothing sector on the issue of AIDS, making education and training a more tangible part of the central bargaining process may be a stumbling block.

Len Smart of the National Clothing Manufacturers Association (NCMA), for example, believes that employers within the sector are doing an enormous amount already and that educational programmes around HIV/AIDS have been primarily employer driven.

'We have done a lot of research on how HIV/AIDS is going to effect our industry and out of that a number of progressive pieces of legislation have been put in place to benefit workers,' says Smart. 'At present our provident fund pays out a death benefit amounting to 60% of a worker's final wage, as well as the annual multiplier. We have support structures in place and are facilitating an ongoing education process within the industry that addresses the stigma around HIV/AIDS.'

In an industry in which up to 15% of the workforce may be infected with HIV, the need for clear and decisive partnership between employers and labour is critical. Smart, however, does not see this action taking place within the context of a centralised bargaining process.



Pic: Raf's Mayer

*SACTWU has made significant efforts putting HIV/AIDS into the spotlight.*

'Centralised bargaining involves substantive issues and HIV/AIDS is not a substantive issue. We approach it through a problem-solving mechanism with the union and as such there are no 'demands' on the table.'

If HIV/AIDS, with all its implications for production losses, workplace discrimination and health and safety issues, is not seen by the employer bodies as appropriate for the centralised bargaining arena, then how do those very real problems get addressed?

Smart again is adamant that the will and the capacity to meet not only the training and education requirements, but also problems of production losses and discrimination exists.

'The NCMA addresses issues on a case-by-case basis. If an employer comes to us with a problem we give that individual or company advice on how to deal with it. Discriminatory action by employers around HIV/AIDS tends not to happen in this industry because employers are well aware of the law and would be foolish to

take such chances. They would immediately be called to order, not only by the union, but by ourselves as well.'

On the issue of job losses, the NCMA predicts that the majority of workers in the industry who will be infected with HIV will be between the ages of 18 and 35 years. 'We know that there are between 15 000 and 20 000 unemployed machinists between the ages of 30 and 50 years,' says Smart. 'These people remain productive and are less likely to be infected, so we will be able to draw from a significant pool of trained labour as the younger people become unable to work.'

So with a social responsibility framework in place, albeit one that works around the collective bargaining process rather than through it, employers in the textile and clothing sector seem to be taking on the challenge that HIV/AIDS poses.

### **Frame**

Balen Govender is training manager at the Frame Group textile factory in New

Germany, near Pinetown. SACTWU is well represented at the plant and educational workshops on AIDS are regularly offered to all workers.

'AIDS education is incorporated into our skills training programme under health and hygiene, so every employee in this plant is exposed at some time to basic awareness programmes around AIDS,' says Govender.

He believes the education and training is having a positive effect. 'The union used to say AIDS is a white man's disease, but now people are seeing AIDS head on and although the culture of silence is still very prevalent, there is an acknowledgement that the disease is taking its toll.

'From a production point of view, the cost to the company is also on the increase,' admits Govender. 'Late last year we brought in 20 people as surplus labour and by February every one of them had been absorbed. Most of our losses are due to ill health. We can't say it's AIDS or not, but applications for sick leave are definitely on the increase.'

Some employees continue to come to work, even when they are obviously ill. Govender cites an example of one employee who may have shown symptoms of AIDS but insisted on coming to work. 'We had a situation where this employee was falling asleep on the job and generally not coping with the demands of his position and yet would continue to come to work. Now he is in hospital.'

Phumzile Mabele, a SACTWU shopsteward at Frame in New Germany, believes that workers force themselves to come to work, even when they are sick because they fear discrimination or losing their jobs.

'People are still silent about AIDS,' says Mabele. 'They are afraid of being victimised by other workers and losing

their jobs if they take too much time off.'

Mabele welcomes the basic awareness workshops offered at the factory but points out that it is still not easy to get workers released to attend.

'From my department, I can maybe get two or four people per session because the supervisors on the floor are more concerned about production. The machines can never stop. We need a lot of education here,' she adds.

'The majority of us are women with very little formal education. We are single mothers who need information about AIDS to pass onto our children. We are women who struggle against the behaviour of men who refuse to change their attitudes even though we are getting sick and dying. Sometimes we feel helpless because we are *only learning about AIDS* now and for some it is too late.'

Another SACTWU shopsteward, Monica Ismael, works tirelessly on the issue from the Prestige Clothing plant in Durban. She says that management has been very supportive of educational work around HIV/AIDS. Ismael has negotiated two hours off per day to run awareness courses for workers on everything from healthy relationships to Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs).

Of the 1 800 workers at the Prestige plant, more than 800 have received basic education. Management has asked Ismael to extend her work to all the factories in the group.

This education and training initiative has received a very positive response from workers, says Ismael and is a particularly important response to the victimisation that is common on the shopfloor.

'There is discrimination going on between workers. This is because people are still afraid to talk openly about AIDS, so rumours go around about people who may be ill, losing weight, absent a lot.

We've had two independent cases where one worker is targeted, rumoured to have the virus and from that time onward nobody else will share toilet facilities or the canteen with that person.

As shopstewards we have to address these problems from a practical and a political point of view. Practically, we need to give our members correct information so they will not continue to spread myths and untruths about HIV/AIDS. We also have to make it clear that victimising or isolating a fellow worker because of his/her HIV status is an abuse of human rights. These two things go hand in hand.'

## Gender

Ismael also raises the issue of gender and is highly critical of the politics within the union movement which perpetuate AIDS as 'more of a women's issue and sweep it over to the gender desk.

Our leadership structures are still male-dominated and there are many comrades who believe that AIDS is more a woman's problem. It has always been a battle to educate women free from the cultural oppression that we suffer, and some male comrades make it even more difficult with their chauvinist attitudes and their indifference to the problems.'

Elma Geswindt agrees. She is regional administrator and gender co-ordinator for COSATU in the Western Cape and says that there is still a large degree of gender insensitivity within the union movement, particularly around HIV/AIDS.

'The link between HIV/AIDS and violence against women, for example, is one that is being strongly pushed at policy-making level,' says Geswindt.

'Unfortunately we experience more frustration than action around the issue because some of the leadership, which is predominantly male, still believe that

HIV/AIDS is a task for the gender committees.

'What they fail to acknowledge is that HIV/AIDS is not simply a union issue, it is an issue for the entire society. People are dying left, right and centre in our communities, and as such labour should be taking a strong stand, leading from the front and by example.'

## Education and training

For its part, SACTWU is making certain that its members get, in the short-term, basic education and training around AIDS. Dr Feroza Mansoor, the national co-ordinator of the union's HIV/AIDS campaign says the greater long-term challenge lies in establishing an industry model, which promotes ongoing education, in-house testing and counselling and home-based care and improved access to treatment.

'Partnerships between labour, business and government must be established, which effectively address the realities that we are facing presently and the enormous challenges ahead,' says Mansoor.

'Some employers are still waiting for someone to knock on their door with offers of education and training programmes; the government is struggling to address the problem effectively; and some unions are waiting in the wings with no clear policy,' she adds.

The time for decisive trade union action around HIV/AIDS is now. If SACTWU's example to date is anything to go by then the challenges remain enormous, be they political or practical, but the wheels of labour must roll in response. ★

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*Andrea Meeson is a freelance journalist. This article was written as part of the Mediatworkers Project of the Beyond Awareness Campaign, Department of Health.*