

“Unions in South Africa should play the kind of role that unions play in the social democratic or welfare states. Both parties have to get together and be part of a programme of economic reconstruction.”

THAVARAJOO (Slade) PILLAY, president of the Durban Integrated Municipal Employers Society, talks to IMRAAN VALODIA

Early days

I was born in Durban in October 1957 and spent my childhood in Chatsworth, a working-class Indian area south of Durban, in a two-roomed house. Both my parents worked. My dad was a labourer and my mother a machinist in a clothing factory.

I have three brothers. One's a lawyer, another runs his own steel business and my youngest brother is a teacher. I matriculated at the Chatsworth Secondary School.

At an early age my parents taught us the value of education. I studied at the University of Durban Westville (UDW) and completed a diploma in library science in 1979. At university I engaged in student politics. Music was a special interest and we held concerts regularly to raise money for community programmes.

Working as a librarian

After completing my diploma, I worked as a teacher librarian. In late 1980, I was employed

as a librarian by the Durban municipal library.

We experienced exploitation and discrimination at every level. While the library claimed to be an equal opportunity employer, no deeds actively supported or lent credence to this.

Fortunately I worked with UDW graduates whom I knew from my student days. We tackled these problems together, as a small group of concerned workers. We soon realised we needed a powerful and strong trade union. We were all members of the Durban Integrated Municipal Employees Society (DIMES) through the closed shop.

We pressurised the union to take a new direction and to adopt a more militant stand against the injustices perpetrated by management.

Union activity

In 1985, I was elected as a shopsteward. At this time the union was extremely weak, both organisationally and structurally. Workers felt

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little loyalty and commitment to the union. Among the shopstewards there were about three of us who were labelled radicals and militants and were seen as having political goals, rather than taking up the cudgels on behalf of the workers.

Nevertheless we started raising political questions in the various union structures. In 1987, attempts were made to oust us from the union under the pretext of our being in violation of the constitution. This resulted in a Supreme Court case and we were reinstated. Subsequently the general secretary resigned and we began to transform the union organisationally. This was a very traumatic period in the union's history.

We introduced a shopsteward council and executive committee in keeping with the progressive trade union movement. We were then involved in numerous legal battles with the city council, our prime objective being to eradicate past and present injustices. To this end we were very successful.

The union was the prime mover and initiator in demanding beaches be opened to all races. This campaign gained a momentum of its own and we came into contact with progressive organisations both nationally and internationally. Our joint efforts resulted in the mayor Mr Watterson's expulsion from the Mayors' Conference in Paris in the late 1980s. This and other media publicity catapulted the union to national prominence.

In September 1989, I was elected president of the union.

Merger talks with SAMWU

We sought affiliation to COSATU in 1989. We were told we had to merge with the COSATU affiliate - South African Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU). We initiated talks with SAMWU with the merger process high on the agenda. Initially these talks bore fruit but eventually started floundering.

Unfortunately we were faced with numerous problems. The merger was based on principles rather than taking the process into account. Our unions' approach to the merger process was fraught with weaknesses

and problems that emanated directly from inadequate consultation and inadequate mandates from our general membership, which appeared to be divided over the merger issue. We did not sufficiently debate the issue in our structures and as a consequence, members were confused.

A more pragmatic approach to the merger would have facilitated the process. As Comrade Jay Naidoo from COSATU stated at our national congress this year, equal blame could be apportioned to both unions.

The merger has to be prefaced with an appropriate educational process. There has to be a commitment from both sides for the merger to succeed. The main thrust of this education programme should be total transformation of workers' perception. The diversity of our membership both in occupation and political affiliations poses enormous challenges and problems. We have accountants, doctors, lawyers, clerks, and labourers among our membership. At this juncture, the merger process has been suspended. We have embarked on an education programme to educate our members on why the leadership feels the merger is imperative. It's no use our going forward without our members. We need to tread very carefully.

Given COSATU's muscle and the power it can wield in the present and the future, our goal has to be to affiliate to COSATU.

Political beliefs

As an office bearer, I cannot hold any official position in a political party or organisation. Because of the political diversity of our membership, politics becomes a sensitive issue and our tasks as leaders must be to unite rather than alienate or divide workers.

I am a social democrat. I am a strong adherent of the social policies that exist in countries like Sweden and Finland, which are essentially market based and can weather severe economic crises. They have a high growth performance. It is a market-based system allowing intervention by the state, which I think would simultaneously attain the

goals of redistribution and economic growth. Economic growth has to be aligned to an improvement in skills, education and obviously trade unions. In social democracies or welfare states a social security system makes provision for the disadvantaged. The rapprochement between management and trade unions in Sweden since 1937 is a lesson that needs to be learnt and adopted in a new democratic South Africa if our intentions are to reconstruct and build a strong economy and have a fair distribution of wealth.

The union and the state must be seen as equal partners and not as adversaries. Working with the state does not mean the union movement's losing its independence.

The union must be independent but work with the state on issues common to both. The current political climate forces the union to be involved in political issues. Perhaps once a political solution is reached which is supported by the majority, the unions will no longer adopt a high political profile.

The tripartite alliance should be seen in its proper context. This alliance is for the strengthening of progressive forces. When a new popular government is elected, we as workers have to ensure workers' rights are not violated. That is why the Workers' Charter should be part of the constitution. Once political freedom is attained and we have a popular democratic government, the alliance will obviously not be necessary.

Unions in the future

Unions have to adopt a more professional attitude and become sophisticated in their approach. There is a serious lack of discipline and this problem can ultimately lead to a deepening crises within the union. Union personnel have the wrong perception that any rules and regulations are bureaucratic in themselves. This obviously leads to unnecessary friction and animosity.

Comrades must realise the unions must run efficiently and must not misconstrue appropriate discipline as being an appendage of the capitalistic system. Union officials must realise they are workers too and have to face



Photo: Morice

the same discipline as others. Administratively, the unions have to be run as a professional organisation.

It is extremely important to concentrate on administration and appropriate discipline within the union so that we can tackle our problems, including management, more effectively. Hiding behind slogans does not eradicate our daily problems.

Private life

I play cricket, soccer and a little table tennis. As a librarian, I obviously read a lot. I have been married for 11 years and my wife is a primary school teacher. I have three daughters.

Union activities take up a lot of my time. In the beginning my time spent away from home on union business led to friction – but now my wife understands and accepts my commitment. I do a lot of housework, although my wife might disagree. I believe I do my share of the housework and child care. ☆