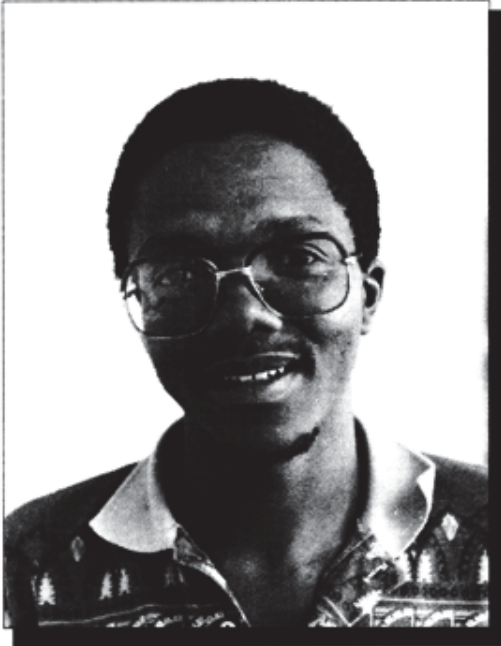


The Big Brain Drain: *union officials in the 1990s*

SAKHELA BUHLUNGU writes about the personnel crisis facing unions as large numbers of experienced and skilled officials – for one reason or another – leave unions to seek employment elsewhere.



Mid-80's union meeting: fierce debates, strong commitments



Sakhela Buhlungu*

Introduction

Early this year I met two comrades I knew from the time I was working for one of the unions affiliated to COSATU. The conversation soon turned into a discussion about the old days in the unions. "You were one of the leading workerists in COSATU," the one comrade said to the other. "And you were a populist," the other replied. We all joked about the seriousness which unionists used to attach to such labels in those days. Those labels and the debates that gave rise to them now belong, so it now seems, to the past. But also, for these two comrades, who used to work as full-time officials in COSATU unions, their involvement in the trade union movement belongs to the past. They left the trade union movement in the late 1980s to pursue other career options. Since then a number of other leading unionists have followed in the footsteps of these and other unionists who left the unions earlier. The seriousness of this exodus, as one unionist has called it, has not been acknowledged until recently when about 60 leading COSATU leaders left during the recent elections to become members of the national assembly and the various regional

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legislatures. The objective of this article is to discuss the reasons for the brain drain from the union movement, particularly COSATU, and to highlight its implications for unions as we go into a future full of opportunities, challenges and dangers for labour. The discussion focuses mainly on full-time union officials but also touches on shop stewards and other union leaders.

The problem

While the problem has been highlighted by the departure of scores of union leaders to parliament, the brain drain has been happening for some years now. Since the late 1980s unions have been losing full time staff through resignations. In the 1990s this trend has accelerated as more opportunities open up in other areas. I would like to clarify at the outset that the problem is not that people leave unions to pursue other career options. Many of the people who have left the unions had very valid reasons. The problem is that unions continue losing experienced and skilled people and are finding it increasingly difficult to replace them with people of the same calibre. Thus, at a time when COSATU and its unions are talking about building their capacity to handle issues, they continue losing that capacity. NUMSA's general secretary, Enoch Godongwana, notes that a number of organisers and shop stewards are going into management. The concern is that his union has put "a lot of effort" into training these people.

The second problem is that very few people of similar experience and skill as those leaving are joining the labour movement. In 1991 one union had a number of key vacancies at its head office which they advertised in the press. They received numerous applications and most were from clearly unskilled and inexperienced school leavers while the rest came mainly from people whose skills were completely unsuitable for the union. While the school-leavers were prepared to work for anything, those with some skills were demanding better pay and conditions. Now that opportunities are opening up elsewhere for

people with some skills, one imagines that only school leavers, who have very little if anything to offer by way of skills and experience, will bother to apply.

The third problem is that it is difficult to have continuity in an organisation when there is a high turnover of staff. It is true that full-time officials are employees in a union and that decisions are taken by members. But full-time union officials have an ambiguous dual role as both leaders and employees in a union. It is in their capacity as leaders that they play a crucial role in decision-making and in ensuring continuity and consistency. Pointing to this problem, Muzi Buthelezi, acting general secretary of the CWIU, says, "In general terms people are leaving the unions and we are going to have a different labour movement after the 27 April. The quality of organisers has changed. Now they come to the unions to work. It is not a commitment any more."

All the above have very serious implications for the strength and strategic direction that unions, particularly COSATU are going to take in future. It means that we can no longer take it for granted that COSATU will remain the strong federation that it is or that its traditions, principles and strategic direction will remain what they are today. This is particularly important in view of the fact that a number of key leading shop stewards are also leaving the unions for a number of reasons.

Why are officials leaving unions?

1. Greener pastures

According to Buthelezi, many union officials leave to look for 'greener pastures'. It is common knowledge that union salaries and other conditions and benefits are poor and uncompetitive. CAWU's general secretary, Matthews Oliphant admits that low morale or lack of commitment in his union is, in part, due to low remuneration. Last year the highest paid official in his union was earning R1 600 per month before tax. COSATU and the bigger unions pay slightly better than this but they are hardly competitive salaries. In the early days of the

brain drain union officials would leave and join better paying unions or NGOs. (*For details on union salaries and conditions see article by Collins in this issue*). Competition has stiffened even further now with management, parliament and the new civil service offering much bigger packages which include better benefits, shorter hours of work and greater opportunities for upward mobility.

2. Greater family responsibilities

Part of the reason why salaries and conditions have become more important in the unions is the fact that union officials are increasingly settling down to family life by getting married, buying houses and putting more emphasis on providing for the needs of their families. The family man or woman of the 1970s and '80s now has to prove to the family that the sacrifices that they have made over the years in the name of the struggle were worthwhile. On the other hand, the young single union activist of the 1980s has suddenly become a married man or woman with greater material needs. One young unionist I spoke to last year confessed that he was struggling to make ends meet with his union salary of about R1 900 per month before tax. He had to provide for his unemployed parents and his younger brothers and sisters, look after himself and was planning to get married. He said he was under a lot of pressure from his family to look for another job. Less than a month after I spoke to him he had joined management!

The problem has been worse with returned exiles who came back into the unions as full-time officials. Most of them have now left the unions and it is known that some of them left because they felt union salaries were too low to enable them to rebuild their lives. Many of them are now in better paying jobs elsewhere.

3. Management poaching

In recent years management has gone on an all-out campaign to recruit union officials for personnel and human resource positions. CWIU's McVicar Dyasopu has had personal experiences of this: "Management is poaching us openly. One

organiser in Natal is being harassed by management offering him the position of IR manager, a company car, a house and about R5 000 per month. He has turned the offer down. They also keep asking me out for lunch. I keep ducking and diving. They say they would like to talk to me as a friend, not a union official.”

But not all officials turn these offers down. Recently a TGWU official joined management and was offered a company car (a BMW), a salary of about R6 000 per month and other perks. Towards the end of November last year I interviewed a certain union official for a research project I am doing. In January I tried to contact him at the union office and I was told he no longer worked there. He was working for management in one of the companies he used to organise. PPWAWU is one of the unions most affected by ‘defections’ to management over the years. The union’s assistant general secretary, Themba Mfeka, admits that it is “very difficult for the union to compete with management in the labour market.”

4. Loss of vision

The movement of union officials to management is a new and interesting trend in South Africa. It is particularly interesting given that unions in COSATU have always regarded management as their ideological enemies. One union official who has since left the unions rationalised this development in the following terms: “The fact is that the country is in transition and we in the labour movement are not immune to the changes taking place in the country. My view therefore is that we cannot stop people from joining management.” Chris Bonner of CWIU’s education department argues that this shift is caused by uncertainty and a ‘loss of the fight’ in the labour movement. She argues further, “The staff is restless because the labour movement has lost a sense of direction. There is no consensus or united vision as we had at one stage. There is nothing that binds COSATU. There is no sense of purpose or mission that pulls people

together, like what campaigns do we have. We are not clear where we are going.”

The fate of the ex-unionists

At this stage little is known about the role of former unionists once they are part of management. What is known is that many of them have little or no management skills and are recruited solely for their ‘union backgrounds’. Snippets of information I have collected show that at least the earlier generation who joined management were recruited because they seemed to have credibility with the workers. But once that credibility was gone management would either fire them or make their positions untenable. In Durban a unionist-turned-personnel officer failed to win the support of the workers and was subsequently downgraded to an ordinary pay clerk and interpreter in union-management meetings. He ended up so frustrated that he quit the job. Another in the Eastern Cape, also a personnel officer, turned out to be such a union basher that the workers toyi-toyi-ed, demanding his dismissal. He was eventually fired after he was caught drunk at work. However, it now seems that recent recruits into management take on a wider range of responsibilities than just controlling the workers. In some cases they are taken through certain training programmes before they start working in their positions.

Commitment or career

Although low remuneration and poor working conditions are a major cause of the exodus, some unionists argue that there are a number of other factors that cause officials to leave. Gavin Hartford of NUMSA argues that part of the problem is that there are no career paths for union officials. He predicts that following the election the trend of people leaving unions will accelerate. “After the elections union officials will be in the market. There will be affirmative action and many people will be looking for clever guys with black faces.” “Some people have been around for too long,” Bonner points out. “Suddenly new

COSATU - THE WORKERS' VOICE

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|---|---|--|--|--|---|
| <p>JOHNNY COPELYN</p>  <p>General Secretary SACTWU Southern Natal</p> | <p>PHILLIP DEXTER</p>  <p>General secretary NEHAWU Witwatersrand</p> | <p>ALEC ERWIN</p>  <p>Economist/educationalist NUMSA Southern Natal</p> | <p>SIPHO GCABASHE</p>  <p>Co-ordinator COSATU Peace Project Southern Natal</p> | <p>MARCEL GOLDING</p>  <p>Assistant general secretary NUM Witwatersrand</p> | <p>DONALD GUMEDE</p>  <p>Ex-president CWIU Southern Natal</p> |
| <p>ELIZABETH THABETHE</p>  <p>Gender co-ordinator CWIU Witwatersrand</p> | <p>ELIJAH BARAYI</p>  <p>Ex-president COSATU Witwatersrand</p> |  | | <p>JAY NAIDOO</p>  <p>Ex-general secretary COSATU Witwatersrand</p> | <p>RANDALL V. D. HEEVER</p>  <p>General secretary SADTU Witwatersrand</p> |
| <p>SUSAN SHABANGU</p>  <p>Gender co-ordinator TGWU Witwatersrand</p> | | | | | <p>SERAKE LEEUW</p>  <p>Regional chairperson COSATU OFS/Northern Cape</p> |
| <p>DANNY OLIPHANT</p>  <p>Vice-president NUMSA Western Cape</p> | | | | | <p>JOYCE MABUDAFHASI</p>  <p>Treasurer NEHAWU Northern Transvaal</p> |
| <p>DUMA NKOSI</p>  <p>President SACCAWU Witwatersrand</p> | <p>CHRISTOPHER DLAMINI</p>  <p>Ex-president - FAWU Ex vice president - COSATU Witwatersrand</p> | | | <p>GODFREY OLIPHANT</p>  <p>Ex-vice president COSATU OFS/Northern Cape</p> | <p>SALIE MANIE</p>  <p>Branch chairperson SAMWU Western Cape</p> |
| <p>NKOSINATHI NHLEKO</p>  <p>Ex-general secretary TGWU Northern Natal</p> | <p>THABA MUFAMADI</p>  <p>Vice-president POTWA Northern Transvaal</p> | <p>THAMI MSELEKU</p>  <p>Assistant regional secretary SADTU Midlands</p> | <p>KGABISI MOSUNKUTU</p>  <p>President POTWA Witwatersrand</p> | <p>SHEPHERD MDLADLANE</p>  <p>President SADTU Witwatersrand</p> | <p>MOSES MAYEKISO</p>  <p>General secretary NUMSA Witwatersrand</p> |

ANC - THE WORKERS' CHOICE

For COSATU: A great human resources loss, but only the tip of the iceberg

opportunities, new avenues have appeared.” This is a particularly important issue which points to a more general point about the impact of transition in a society which is moving away from racism and minority rule. Unions were one of the few areas of employment which fell outside the control of the enemy - the apartheid state and management - where people could feel proud of their work. Many of those who chose to work in unions did not do so because it was a career choice but because it was ‘the struggle’. Now that there is democratisation and deracialisation of society and some affirmative action in management levels many people in unions are now beginning to think of careers, jobs in which they can rise and prosper so that they can be in a position to provide for their families. At this stage, for a number of unionists unions do not offer many opportunities as a career option.

NUMSA is one of the unions hardest hit by the exodus. Apart from top leaders who were lost to parliament, the union head office has been virtually denuded of leadership.

It is too early to give figures of union officials who are joining or will join the new civil service. However, it is clear that the civil service has now become a legitimate structure in the eyes of all activists and those who are offered key jobs in the service will accept them readily. Already there are reports of head-hunting of COSATU officials for key civil service jobs like directors, personal assistants, secretaries, etc, and there are indications

“The quality of organisers has changed”

that some union officials, including administrators, are following their leaders into government. In one case a union official went for an interview on a Wednesday, got the job and was at his desk in the new job the following Monday. He is a PA to one of the former COSATU leaders who now occupies a senior position in one of the new

regions. At this stage most full-time officials are being absorbed by the department of labour, the RDP office and those departments headed by former COSATU leaders, but there may be others who will be asked to work in other departments. It is now an open secret that the new minister of labour, Tito Mboweni has been spending his first few weeks in office scouting for information and profiles of ‘prominent unionists’. What is not clear at this stage is what positions he has for them.

There is another category of union official who leave unions. These are people who leave to improve their educational qualifications. These are mainly people who already had matric or other post-matric qualifications when they joined the labour movement. It is not clear where some of these people go once they complete their studies. What is certain is that very few of them go back to the labour movement. One of these former unionists that I spoke to said he was still considering a number of options but the labour movement was not one of them. Interestingly, the one option he seemed to favour was ‘going into industry’, which could be interpreted to mean a human resources or personnel department position in one of the companies.

A new development is that of officials who are doing part-time or correspondence courses while working in the union. What is interesting is that people have suddenly realised the need to improve themselves and the likelihood is that once they complete those courses some may begin looking for employment where these newly acquired skills will be recognised and rewarded.

The shop stewards

The brain drain is not only at the level of full-time union officials. There is also a clear trend of shop stewards leaving their union positions or leaving the unions altogether to take up higher positions, particularly managerial positions in personnel and human resource departments, but also as supervisors

and production technicians. The advent of affirmative action has made the issue of shop stewards leaving unions even more serious. In many cases shop stewards come from the ranks of the better educated among the workforce. This was confirmed by the CASE/SWOP survey conducted in 1991. The implication of this is that most shop stewards are the most eligible candidates for affirmative action in the workplace.

This is a dilemma that the unions have been facing for a long time but have not been able to resolve. On the one hand it is important for people who have risen through the ranks of unions to occupy key positions in the workplaces and in companies generally. These people could play a crucial role in providing the unions with important information regarding the operation of companies and production in workplaces. Those who argue in favour of taking promotions maintain it is one way of empowerment for workers and it would be ill-advised for unions to reject them. However, those who argue against promotions maintain that the promotions seldom occur in consultation with the unions and management usually insist that the people who get the promotion should resign from the union. In other instances once a person goes up the hierarchy they simply go above the union's bargaining unit and therefore cease to be union members. It is also argued that in the majority of cases, once shop stewards get promotion they begin to identify with management and become aloof from the union - in short, they get co-opted.

The ambivalence of the unions on this issue has meant that no solution has been found and unions continue losing leadership in which they have invested a lot of resources through grooming and training. The significance of this trend for the purposes of this article is that it exacerbates the brain drain and weakens the union movement.

How are the unions responding?

In the past the usual response of the unions and their leadership was to condemn those

who leave because it was felt they lacked commitment to the labour movement. Those who joined management, shop stewards and full-time officials, were regarded as sell-outs. To some extent this view still informs union responses to the brain drain, particularly to those who join management.

PPWAWU's president, Pasco Dyani, says the union is "perturbed that officials are going to management. They use the unions as waiting rooms, take union skills and use them against the workers".

But union leaders now acknowledge that union salaries and conditions are poor and that this is a major contributory factor to the brain drain. Many unions have started grappling with this problem by trying to improve conditions by increasing salaries, introducing benefits like provident funds and medical aid, setting up car schemes and introducing salary grades (as opposed to a flat salary structure). However, most unions are constrained by limited resources.

However, the biggest problem appears to be the fact that most unions do not see staffing issues as a priority despite the fact that the unions employ scores and even hundreds of officials each. (For example, at the end of November 1993 NUMSA had 341 full time officials). Staffing planning and staff development occur in a haphazard fashion and unions respond to problems and crises as they occur. One of the ideas that has been discussed before in the unions is that recruitment should give preference to shop stewards from within the union because outsiders, particularly those with no workplace experience are unreliable. But in practice recruitment is still a haphazard process and does not reflect this thinking.

One of the responses one gets when speaking to unionists about the brain drain, particularly the latest wave, is that unions must build leadership and draw on what is generally known as 'second layer leadership'. However, this does not address

**"We are not sure
where we are going"**

the specific situation of full-time officials and key shop stewards. It also does not address the fact that most of the replacements will have less experience and little understanding of the principles and traditions that have been the hallmark of COSATU. In many respects the latest wave of the brain drain has left a number of unions paralysed. There are very few ideas coming through and as long as uncertainty continues about who is leaving and who is not, the unions will remain paralysed.

Conclusions

In this article I have discussed one of the issues facing the unions, COSATU unions in particular. The objective is not to pass judgements on the subject or the people mentioned but to start debate, and hopefully, some in the labour movement will want to debate some of the issues raised here. Facts and material for this article was collected over a period of time while working for PPWAWU and while doing work for The Shopsteward, SA Labour Bulletin and the Sociology of Work Project at Wits.

In conclusion I would like to make a few points. The first one is that unions must now accept that full time officials will come and go and they will make these decisions on the basis of whether working for the union is a good career option or not. This happens to companies, the civil service and other institutions. Unions need to take staffing as one the priorities in building their capacities, and in doing so they need to plan staffing on an ongoing basis and continually review and improve conditions so as to make trade unionism a good career option. It is only in this way that they will be able to attract and keep skilled and committed officials. This does not mean paying the same salary as management or even the civil service. The important thing is people must feel they are getting decent remuneration. There are many people who work for other institutions who pay less than the civil service or management but they still see their jobs as a good career

option.

Secondly, the tradition in COSATU unions is that officials do not negotiate what salaries and benefits they get. Also, in a number of cases the skills people have are not taken into account when their remuneration is worked out. Though the situation is changing in some unions and officials are asked to indicate what they would like to get, there is still insufficient discussion where people could voice out their opinions on the issue. Increasingly better skilled people will resent the fact that their skills or qualifications are not taken account of. Thus some will decide to vote with their feet.

Thirdly, the issue of shop stewards leaving the union to join management needs to be addressed urgently, and this does not necessarily mean stopping it. Unions can no longer afford skirting around the issue because it is central to capacity building.

Fourthly, the system of the full-time shop steward has not been used to its full potential by the unions. New and creative ways should be found to ensure that full time shop stewards take on some of the roles of the full-time official, but not in an ad hoc and chaotic way as happens now with a number of full time stewards. Surely, there are examples elsewhere in the world of how this can be done.

Finally, COSATU and the other federations need to explore the possibility of getting higher institutions of learning like universities to run fully recognised certificate or diploma courses in labour and labour studies to prepare unionists and other people in society generally to understand trade unionism as a career option. For too long these institutions have prepared and continue to train people for management. This may not necessarily translate into scores of people joining unions as officials, but it would produce a number of intellectuals whose area of interest is labour. Some of them may decide to work in the union movement. After all, a number of the key leaders of the labour movement who have just left had intellectual backgrounds. ☆