

# The Negotiators

## Problems, policies and plans

*The Labour Research Service held a conference for negotiators, to assist union negotiators. What was on the table?*

**T**here is an increasing sense that labours' position in collective bargaining is being weakened, partly a result of the attitudes being adopted by employers and partly by the current environment.

It emerged during discussion that:

- unions should have uniformity of demands;
- objectives of negotiations need to be clear;
- agreements should be implemented and monitored to ensure enforcement
- there should be greater capacity building in the unions around collective bargaining strategies and issues;
- close attention should be paid to communication with and mobilisation of members; and
- there is a need to develop an understanding of legislation that can protect workers and improve their conditions and how to use this legislation.

Two key concerns were raised by union negotiators about arguments companies will use to justify low increases this year:

**Inflation:** The CPI-X has come down considerably during the past year and the projection for this year is that it will remain low. Employers will therefore not offer high increases.

**Exchange rate:** Due to the strength of

the rand goods produced locally have become more expensive than imported goods. Employers will say that costs, especially wage costs, will have to be kept low to keep locally produced goods at competitive prices and ensure that local production remains viable.

Some discussion focused on trying to understand how companies are attempting to break the strength of unions and reduce workers' power: **Long term agreements:** These agreements, signed in the past four years, have left workers unable to cope with rising inflation and also extended the period when critical issues that are part of that bargaining round are put on the back burner. More and more employers are pushing for long term agreements.

**Bargaining forums:** Forums used for collective bargaining, which unions and workers have been able to use effectively, are being undermined by employers.

**Workers restructuring:** Restructuring is continuously being proposed. The effects are outsourcing, retrenchments, contracting out and casualisation instead of permanent job creation.

The following were raised as key national issues that require collective and common strategies:

**State budgetary policies:** there is no real improvement in the amount of

budgetary allocations to those aspects of expenditure that put pressure on workers wages (health, education, water, electricity, care for the sick and elderly, transport)

**Extreme wage gaps and inequality:** the wage gaps have become very wide and there is a need for common strategies to reduce inequality in the workplace and in society generally.

**HIV/AIDS:** unions need to incorporate protection for workers who are HIV/AIDS positive and ensure companies enforce their HIV/AIDS policies in the workplace.

Strengthening labour's position in collective bargaining will require the following types of interventions:

- While different regions/sectors have different needs and therefore set different mandates, there needs to be a national union strategy;
- Unions are often fragmented and put in different demands to employees. Unions need to look at how they can cooperate and put forward common demands; and
- Workers preparedness and capacity to struggle has been weakened for a number of reasons. This raises the importance of involving workers in the collective bargaining process through ensuring that they determine the mandate given to negotiators and are mobilised throughout the negotiations.

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