

The professional union: IMATU

Bulletin: When and why was IMATU formed?

IMATU: The Independent Municipal and Allied Trade Union (IMATU) was launched on 8 March 1996. It brought together trade unions that had co-operated for years under the banner of the Federation of Municipal Trade Unions.

The unions that amalgamated were the Durban Municipal Employees' Society (DMES), Johannesburg Municipal Employees Association (JMEA), National Union of Employees of Local Authorities (NUELA), South African Association of Municipal Employees (SAAME) and South African Local Authorities and Allied Workers Union (SALAAWU).

We came together to form IMATU because we knew that having a number of small unions in the local government sector was not ideal. We anticipated changes in the LRA that would favour majority unions and we knew that to represent workers we would need to be a strong representative force in local government.

Bulletin: What sectors do you organise in?

IMATU: We organise in local government – we organise in all municipalities nationally.

Tanya van Meelis and Rugaya Rees interview Clive Dunstan (IMATU president) and Klasie Claassens (IMATU general secretary).

Bulletin: What other unions organise in this sector?

IMATU: The other union that is recognised by the South African Local Government Bargaining Council is SAMWU. MESHAWU and other smaller unions are not recognised.

Bulletin: Is there competition between the unions?

IMATU: There is always competition for membership. We have a very good working relationship with SAMWU on issues that affect workers nationally, such as joint wage negotiations and a minimum wage. We caucus together before negotiations, especially at the national level. We work together in every division to improve working conditions and the work environment. We do not have a working relationship with MESHAWU because it is excluded from the bargaining council and there is bitterness about this.

Bulletin: *What is your membership and has it been rising or falling?*

IMATU: We have about 70 000 members. However, many people are moving out of local government and new people coming in are coming in on two- to three-year contracts. Local government is also downsizing. In the future, top management will be on contracts of two to three years with a maximum of five years. Despite this, our membership has stayed constant over the past three years.

Bulletin: *Who are your members?*

IMATU: We organise all grades and have members of all races. More than 35% of our members are black - this includes African, Indian and coloured workers. IMATU rejects the notion and perception of being a 'white-collar union' and a predominantly 'white' union.

Bulletin: *How do you reconcile what may be different interests between your members in different grades?*

IMATU: Workers' needs are basically all the same - you need to address their working conditions and remuneration. For example, leave should be the same for all workers. Where there are differences between workers you can compromise. The bargaining council can set minimums and these minimums can be raised by different local authorities. SALGA wants to close the wage gap but the problem is that you can't measure this scientifically. The municipality appointed someone in Johannesburg and are paying him approximately R1,2-million per annum. We would love to see the wage gap close to 1 to 12 here!

Bulletin: *What are your structures?*

IMATU: We have a national executive council and 13 regional committees. We have 13 regional offices with full-time staff servicing the regional committees, and 230 branches throughout South Africa. The national executive council has five portfolio committees: labour relations, strategic, finance, executive and staff.

Bulletin: *Why did you set up the different committees?*

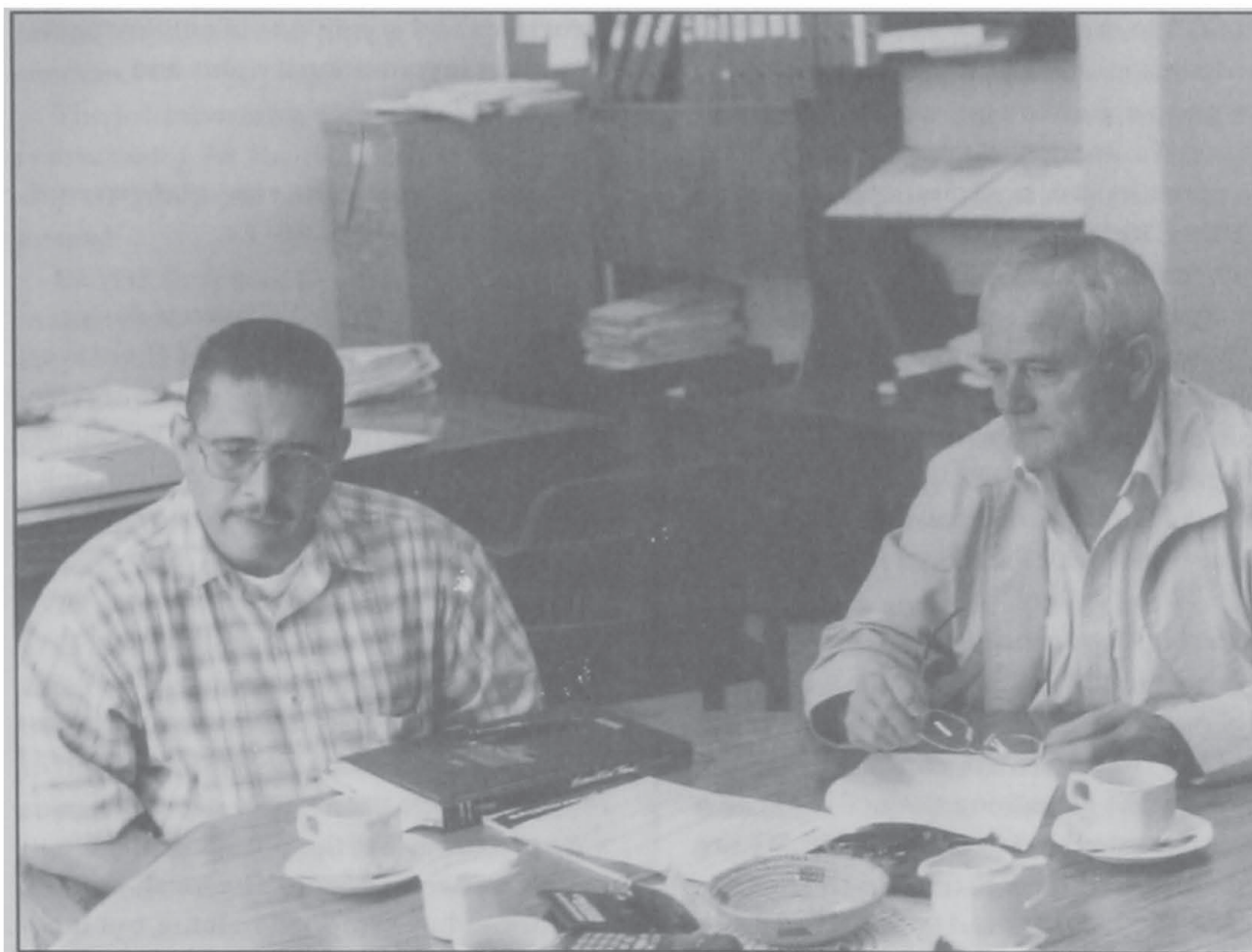
IMATU: We made changes to our constitution at our national congress, which was held in March 1999. One of the changes was to establish an executive committee with four portfolio committees reporting to the NEC through the executive committee. We did this to help us focus on issues that affect members daily. We also wanted to streamline the running of the union and to speed up decision-making. I am satisfied we have now achieved this.

Bulletin: *Are women represented on your structures?*

IMATU: Three women were elected on our national executive council. Women have family responsibilities and this makes participation difficult. We try to create an environment where women can take part in union activities. For example, we try and finish meetings at 4pm.

Bulletin: *Are your locals sitting and are they well attended?*

IMATU: There are not problems with the local committees. Poor attendance is not a particular problem unless the meetings are after-hours or on a Saturday. South Africans are complacent. We are negotiating a national organisational rights agreement that will allow people time-off for meetings.



Clive Dunstan (IMATU president) and Klasie Claasens (IMATU general secretary).

Bulletin: *How is IMATU staffed?*

IMATU: IMATU employs about 100 people throughout the country. We decentralised servicing to members, so staff are employed in nine provincial and four metropolitan regions. Staff also concentrate on specific areas such as recruitment and team building.

Bulletin: *How do you ensure that IMATU staff work efficiently?*

IMATU: You need to be fair to people and pay them a fair salary. We pay market-related salaries to attract suitably qualified people. (This is our policy in local government and in the union itself.) You also need to treat people like professionals. We have a disciplinary

procedure but we have not had to use it to date. We also have a system of consultation for staff. Union staff have elected fellow staff members who represent them at the staff committee. They negotiate staff's salaries, conditions of employment, etc.

Bulletin: *Why is it important to affiliate to FEDUSA?*

IMATU: FEDUSA is represented at Nedlac and all labour issues go to Nedlac. FEDUSA is also non-political. We don't believe that there should be only one federation in the country - there should be alternative options. Through FEDUSA we are also able to get information from Parliament and to lobby.

Bulletin: *What are the strengths and weaknesses of FEDUSA?*

IMATU: In the past FEDSAL (the predecessor of FEDUSA) employed only a few people. It didn't get support from the unions. We decided to get more involved. We increased our contributions to FEDUSA. We also have a staff member who has been elected as FEDUSA's vice-president

We are hoping to increase the staff complement of FEDUSA and are looking at dedicating a staff member to FEDUSA. Government takes FEDUSA seriously and consults with it a lot. President Mandela has also met with FEDUSA a few times.

Bulletin: *What are your bargaining arrangements?*

IMATU: The South African Local Government Bargaining Council (SALGBC) was established in September 1997. We are expecting it to be registered in the first half of 1999. IMATU and SAMWU are the only unions on this council and together we represent about 190 000 local authority employees. The council is experiencing teething problems which we are addressing.

The teething problems are the result of a new system of collective bargaining in local government. Prior to the establishment of the bargaining council, bargaining in local government was conducted in seven industrial councils. All this has now been centralised in one bargaining council with 13 divisions. Working groups and committees that were set up by the bargaining council are not all functioning satisfactorily.

The fact that the central council and its 13 divisions do not employ full-time staff as yet (this work is being performed part-time by municipal employees) also makes the running thereof problematic. Some of the challenges that are facing the parties are setting new integrated salary

structures and conditions of employment, as well as organisational rights and structures.

Bulletin: *What key internal and external challenges do you face?*

IMATU: A key external challenge is municipal service partnerships. There is a national agreement that the public service should be given the first chance to deliver before a service is privatised. You can only privatise if the public service can't deliver that service.

A big concern is that international companies are coming in and running the services for profit. Because they want profit, they are not going to the rural areas where there is a need for services. We need to change the attitude of people – we need to look at the productivity of people and train people. The local authorities have stopped training, but it is more training that will increase productivity. We also need to look at the bureaucratic red tape within municipalities which stifles service delivery.

Two hundred and fifty local authorities have financial problems, but no one is looking at the cause of the problems. A common excuse is that we are providing to disadvantaged communities. We need to look at how we can sustain local authorities, make services affordable and offer the poor a lifeline for service. National government does not give funding to local authorities and they must make do on their own.

Another challenge is revenue collection. We need new ideas on how to collect the money. In Johannesburg 30% of business owe the council money. Councils should not write off this debt. Johannesburg is writing off R1.5-billion. Councillors should be used to help educate the community

on the importance of paying for services

The Johannesburg council is restructuring for the fourth time. It should stop restructuring and deliver services instead

IMATU, through FEDUSA, was involved in the negotiations around the Employment Equity Act. We support the aims in the Act and believe that the designated groups should advance within a balanced framework. The interests and rights of non-designated groups must also be looked after

IMATU's internal challenge is to strive to increase effectiveness and efficiency. Like every organisation, we always review our costs. Two years ago we decentralised to become more effective and we will do so again if necessary. We also try to ensure that we keep our office bearers and staff equipped to face the challenges

Bulletin: What is your view on the intended retrenchments in the public sector?

IMATU: We will ask whether it is really necessary and how can we save jobs. Retrenchment will just add to unemployment and eventually the government pays. Government could always redeploy people in the public service.

This is a challenge for the union and we need to find new ways of dealing with it. If people are retrenched they must be given the skills to go into the private sector. If we do not reduce unemployment we will not reduce crime. Why not put more people into police stations to do administrative work? This would be one creative solution.

Bulletin: What is your actual response to the privatisation of water?

IMATU: Government will create another monopoly by giving a life-sustaining service such as water provision, to profit-driven companies. This will only create a short-term solution but will create a long-term problem. We need to get conglomerates into rural areas to build dams and reservoirs. But they won't go because they won't make a return on their investment

Bulletin: What is your assessment of the Job Creation Trust?

IMATU: It's a good idea but we never implemented it properly. COSATU and FEDUSA should have consulted more with their constituents first before proposing the trust. The timing of asking workers to donate one day's pay was inopportune in these difficult financial times. People have come and said 'you can't just tell us to donate money, why rather not let us donate one day's leave pay?'

Bulletin: What is your message to your members?

IMATU: We call on people not to leave municipal service - please don't take your skills and leave local government. We urge members to impart their skills to colleagues to build the country and local government in particular

Bulletin: What is your message to employers?

IMATU: Do the right thing - take off the blinkers, there are other ways of doing things. Educate people and don't see unions as the enemy.

Take us on board and let us help save local government. We're all working for the same goal in the end. Viva South Africa! ★