

# The security industry

## *privatisation and organisation*

**W**hile the police force is struggling with sinking morale amongst its officers, the private security industry is gradually taking over a major protective role in South Africa for individual households, companies and government departments.

The private security sector has officially grown from two companies in 1990 to 1 104 in 1998, according to figures from the Security Officers' Board. The private security sector is fragmented - it spreads and divides the workforce. This spreading and division of the workforce is generally regarded as being at odds with unionisation, collective action and working class solidarity.

### Privatisation of security

While reliable figures are hard to come by, it has been estimated that the private security sector currently employs close to 200 000 security guards. These groups are found in three broad categories:

- guarding security
- electronic security
- investigations.

Guarding security is regarded as the largest and most visible category in the industry and includes armed responses and 'cash-in-transit' operations. According to the Security Officers' Board, there are about 100 000 active security guards spread across 2 700 companies. There are, however, also numerous companies

*The private security industry is fragmented and growing.*

*Sabata Nakanyane outlines the impact this has on unionisation in the sector and draws implications for TGWU.*

operating illegally (commonly referred to as 'fly-by-nights'). While private security has become big business and a big employer, it is also an unstable industry with many companies not surviving the competition for tight profit margins. The instability in the sector is reflected in the table below, which looks only at registered legal security companies.

Electronic security includes installers of burglar alarms and quick reaction devices.

**Table 1: Company Registration (Security Officers' Board 1998)**

| Year         | Active | Closed | Total |
|--------------|--------|--------|-------|
| 1990         | 2      | 1      | 3     |
| 1991         | 329    | 468    | 767   |
| 1992         | 204    | 384    | 588   |
| 1993         | 226    | 441    | 667   |
| 1994         | 254    | 373    | 627   |
| 1995         | 410    | 493    | 903   |
| 1996         | 626    | 456    | 1 082 |
| 1997         | 1 302  | 194    | 1 496 |
| 1998 to date | 1 104  | 9      | 1 113 |

The category is not as large as the guarding security sector but has a fairly substantial membership. Extracts from the security industry register indicate that in 1998 there were 1 869 businesses involved in activities like alarm installation, locksmiths and consultants.

Investigations comprise private investigators, who cover matrimonial disputes, labour matters, industrial espionage, criminal investigations and VIP protection services. The category is estimated to consist of 200 individuals, although 2 000 people may be involved at any one time.

### Unionisation

About 47 000 security guards are organised. This gives a relatively low union density rate in an industry with 200 000 guards.

The following table indicates the union membership divided by the various unions in the sector. The table covers the unions that are known and participate in the activities (negotiations and bargaining) organised under the auspices of the Security Officers' Board. But it should be noted that according to newspaper reports that covered the strike by security guards in 1998, there were about 11 unions participating in the strike. The other unions not in the table are: SEGEWU, NASGAWU, FOGSWU and FGWU.

**Table 2: Security unions and their estimated membership\***

| Trade union | Estimated membership |
|-------------|----------------------|
| TGWU        | 20 000               |
| PTWU        | 2 500                |
| SOCRU       | 4 000                |
| SASWU       | 1 200                |
| SANSOF      | 900                  |
| SACSAWU     | 3 000                |
| NASWU       | 2 000                |

\* Figures from unions

### Challenges for unions

The character or type of activities in the sector makes the workplace invisible – workers do not work under the same roof but are dispersed to do work in different companies or work sites. This creates difficulties for union leaders and organisers to access and recruit new members. It makes it difficult for organisers to hold meetings with workers. It also means that workers always work in rapidly changing groups and this creates little opportunity to build up a sense of common identity and solidarity.

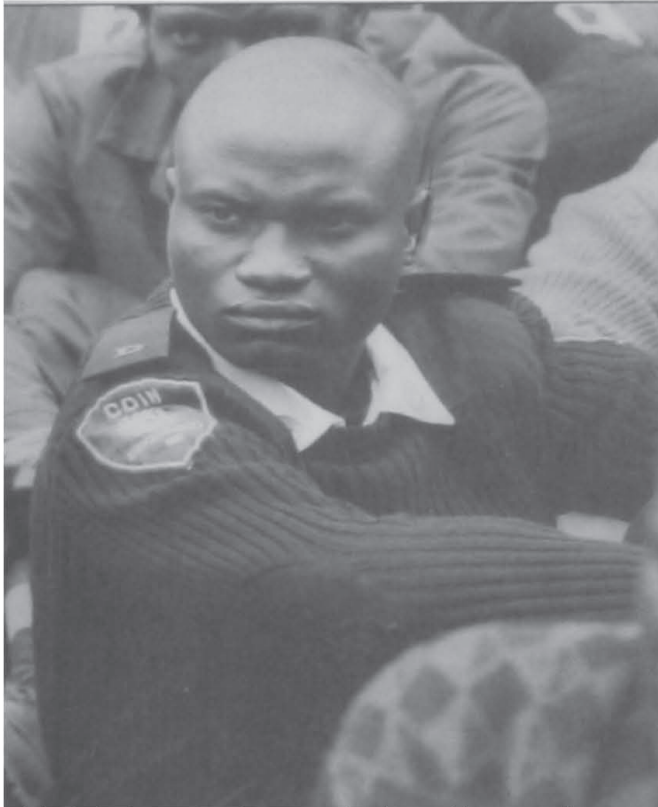
The private security industry is also adopting a 'flexible form' of operation – 'self-posting'. Here, security guards go to their designated working areas without first going to their employers' premises. This means that the security guards do not have to assemble together before work and are not driven together in the same bus to their designated working areas. Self-posting in the industry can cripple trade union organisation as it divides a firms' workforce into segments. Organisers can no longer meet large groups of union members on the employers' premises to discuss union issues. Thus self-posting impacts negatively on serving collective organisation and solidarity.

Related to the above, unions are faced with the challenge of insufficient resources or capacity to organise in this growing and diverse industry. The nature of the industry requires more organisers than unions are able to provide.

Fragmentation and decentralisation overstretch organisers, making it difficult for them to cover all the companies in the industry.

A final obstacle facing union officials when they have to recruit and service members, is the high rate of dismissal cases they have to attend to at the CCMA.

According to the CCMA 1998 Annual Report,



*Security guards need to be informed about unions.*

8% of the total cases it handled were from the private security sector. The sector has been characterised by high incidence of unfair dismissals and exploitation.

Whilst the process creates challenges for the unions in the sector, new opportunities are also opening up for unions. Workers are developing informal networks and new forms of solidarity. Although there is the self-posting system, workers in trains and buses are still sharing their experiences and ideas about their working conditions. This sharing of experience assists in developing consciousness amongst the workers about their shared conditions and problems. Compared to most workers in other sectors, who meet their unions for the first time at their workplace, the private security officers meet their unions in places outside their workplace. I conducted several interviews with workers and union members and most

indicated that they heard about the union when talking to others in buses and trains. Ironically, the growth of the industry and the self-posting system are creating new channels for the exchange of information between security guards. This facilitates the development of a new sense of identity.

While growth, fragmented workplaces and new forms of flexibility have negative implications for trade unions, they do not automatically result in deunionisation and a break down in solidarity. The development of informal networks reflects that unions have space and room for action in spite of these processes.

### **New space for organising**

The private security sector is likely to grow in South Africa. The fragmented and decentralised character of the sector is likely to remain. This compels the unions to rethink their methods and strategies for organising. Unions are starting to do this - unions under COSATU are demanding centralised bargaining as a mechanism to counter the effects of fragmentation. Related to this, TGWU is initiating recruitment campaigns through the national shopsteward councils. The national councils are establishing local shopsteward councils that are responsible for recruiting members at local levels.

TGWU is using this 'bread and butter' model in organising workers in the security industry. Now, more than ever before, there is a need to focus on the 'bread and butter' model which involves:

- representing workers in collective bargaining;
- contesting dismissals and retrenchments;
- advising and educating workers about their legislative rights.

There is a need to intensify this model as the industry is characterised by unfair dismissals and retrenchments. Most of the security guards indicate that they joined



*Only 25% of security guards are organised in unions.*

TGWU to be protected from unfair dismissals and for improvement in their wages and working conditions.

Unions need to focus on satisfying workers through service delivery. Workers' satisfaction with the TGWU is closely linked to their impression of service delivery and the effectiveness of their leaders to protect them against management. It is necessary for TGWU to continue to recognise the burning issues facing the security guards, starting with working conditions.

The growth and spreading of security companies has until now overstretched union organisers in terms of capacity and resources. To meet this challenge the TGWU should forge closer ties to other COSATU unions and community organisations to recruit and service members. The argument for reorientation towards community organising is based on the fact that there are security guards assigned to work in companies/ organisations organised by different unions. Based on this assumption, TGWU can use other COSATU unions to inform

the security guards about the presence of unions. It can also use COSATU's other unions to deliver information about its activities to members. Building solidarity with other unions organising in different sectors may be the key to recruiting security guards and strengthening organisation.

Lastly, there is a need to look at other strategies like organising in the buses and trains that security guards are using for their daily transport. This could be an important strategy for recruiting in a sector characterised by self-posting. ★

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