

Think twice before you mess with us

Bulletin: *When and why was FEDUSA formed?*

Milani: FEDUSA was formed on 1 April 1997. The Federation of Organisations Representing Civil Employees (FORCE) and the Federation of South African Labour Unions (FEDSAL) merged to become FEDUSA. There was a need for affiliates to have a relevant federation that could address the needs and aspirations of their members and play a role in policy issues affecting labour.

Bulletin: *How many affiliates do you have?*

Milani: We started with 25 affiliates and 515 000 members. In July this year we had 27 affiliates and 555 471 members. We encourage our member affiliates to merge. The biggest merger we had was in 1998 when ATEASA merged with OASA to form the UASA.

We distinguish between mergers and incorporation. Incorporation occurs when a small union joins a larger union. PHOSA became incorporated into PAWUSA and WUSA became incorporated into SALSTAFF. It is anticipated that SALSTAFF and TWU will merge soon to become a powerful transport union. Our largest affiliate is the PSA. The oldest trade union in the country is SATU (101 years old) and they are also an affiliate.

**Tanya van Meelis and
Rugaya Rees interview Chez
Milani, general secretary of the
Federation of Unions of South
Africa (FEDUSA).**

Bulletin: *Do you intervene in the internal workings of your affiliates?*

Milani: Our affiliates are autonomous in their operation and we do not interfere in their internal working, as long as they operate within the scope and ambit of our constitution and policy laid down by our congress and the NEC. By the same token, we do not like affiliates interfering in our internal working outside of the relevant structures. We get involved in affiliates internal affairs if they ask us to intervene. Spoornet's retrenchment announcement, Sun Air's closure, Igoli 2002 are recent examples of issues we took up at the request of our involved affiliates.

Bulletin: *What do you see as FEDUSA's role?*

Milani: Our main goals may be summarised as follows, firstly, to unite workers under the FEDUSA umbrella around important and relevant issues;

secondly, to provide a platform for affiliates to participate in tripartite structures and other structures at national, international and provisional level; thirdly, to disseminate information to our affiliates. We aim to be a major role player both nationally and internationally; build capacity among affiliates; defend and protect our affiliates' rights; promote co-operation and co-ordination between affiliates; and to speak with an independent voice.

We represent workers on a number of national bodies including Nedlac, the National Skills Authority (NSA), South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), the Unemployment Insurance Fund Board, the working group of the Presidents International Investor Council, the Minister of Labour's Occupational Health and Safety Advisory Council and the National Productivity Institute, to name a few.

Bulletin: *Who are your members?*

Milant: Our members are situated all over South Africa and come from a wide range of sectors. We have seen a growth in our membership. This may be ascribed to our drive to recruit new affiliates, the public sector agency shop agreement and general improved recruitment of members by our affiliates. Our membership is representative of South Africa's demographics and we pride ourselves in being a truly 'rainbow' federation.

The majority of our members are drawn from the ranks of the semi-skilled, skilled and professional workers and may be classified as white-collar workers. Globalisation affects all workers, but it is particularly the 'unskilled' workers who are the most vulnerable. We do have many 'unskilled' workers and would refer to the Food and General Workers Union (F&G)

and our farming unions who organise predominantly 'unskilled workers'.

FEDSAL was historically a predominantly white staff association, with FORCE being representative of all groupings. Our pre-1994 staff associations have democratised and these staff associations have become fully fledged trade unions representing all workers regardless of race.

Any union who does not fully support the non-racist principles we stand for, will fall foul of our constitution and will accordingly not be permitted to join us. Believe it or not there are still unions out there who would fall into this category. The LRA allows anyone to join a trade union and we are finding more and more well paid employees and professionals joining our unions. They can relate to our ideology and obviously find the security in belonging to a union and the related benefits offered, attractive.

I do not like putting people in a 'box' or classifying them, but would guess that our membership could be classified at about 70% previously disadvantaged, inclusive of women. Don't write off the 'pale males', they are also important. We are making an effort to be representative of all South Africans - there is place for everybody in the sun.

Bulletin: *How do you represent the interests of all your members - given differences in skill levels?*

Milant: This is not difficult, as there are not many areas where our members radically disagree. Most issues we busy ourselves with affect all workers - for example labour legislation, economic policy and so on. Where there are different points of view, this ensures good debate within our structures. I've yet to have an issue where we were not able to reach

consensus, with the exception of trying to formulate a FEDUSA policy on the death penalty. We just let this one ride.

When negotiations deadlock on a particular issue there are two weapons available to us. We either institute legal action, ranging from a letter of demand through to the filing of a Section 77 notice, or make use of protected strike action. Our members are responsible and will usually only make use of a strike as a last resort. Can you imagine if our IT employees, pilots, train drivers or miners went on a full blown strike. Our members generally hold strategic positions and have a lot of clout. Bottom line – think twice before you mess with us.



Chez Milani.

Bulletin: *Is there competition between the unions?*

Milani: There is competition between our unions who organise in the same sector. This does however not get out of hand because the affiliates understand that unity within FEDUSA must be maintained as far as possible. There is competition between many of our unions and unions outside the FEDUSA camp, particularly for semi-skilled and unskilled workers. Labour must stand together, but we do agree to disagree with COSATU on certain matters.

The two main areas where we differ relate to the relationship between labour and political parties and the question of ideology. We believe that workers are compromised if a federation is required to tow a particular party line. We will lobby any and all political parties to further our members' interests. Ideology explains what drives a person and why they behave in a particular way. We subscribe to

Mazlow's hierarchy of needs and the idea of self-actualisation. In essence this states that you should be allowed to reap the socialist thinking of 'each according to his/her ability to each according to his/her need'.

Bulletin: *How is FEDUSA staffed?*

Milani: Our head office is based in Northcliff, Johannesburg. This office is the heart of our operation and we are in the process of expanding it. We also have a parliamentary office in Cape Town. We employ 10 competent full-time officials who are paid market related salaries and they are expected to deliver. We are at the service of our affiliates and continually strive to add value to these affiliates. We have a fully fledged training department which is headed up by Dennis George. Our parliamentary office is run by Gretchen Humphries. Both Dennis and Gretchen are assistant general secretaries.

The general secretary is the chief executive officer of the federation and reports to congress, NEC and the management committee. He also takes mandates and instructions from these constitutional structures and gives effect to them. Our officials are empowered to take decisions. In order to streamline our operation and improve on turn around times for mandating, the secretariat summaries the content around issues and makes a recommendation to the structures, who then either accept, vary or reject the said recommendation. This system seems to work well in the present 'high tech' age we live in where there is an information and paper overload and the issues being dealt with are often complex.

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

Milant: We believe in having a properly managed and administratively sound federation. The general secretary supervises the staff. FEDUSA prides itself in having a 'lean mean professional secretariat team' and these individuals are expected to work efficiently and effectively. We have also created a healthy and enjoyable work environment and this I believe is substantiated by us presently having a zero staff turn over rate. If people are unhappy and unfulfilled with their work, they will leave. Where staff problems do occur then the necessary counselling or disciplinary process is obviously initiated.

Bulletin: *What major challenges do you face, both internally and externally?*

Milant: The first major internal challenge we faced after our formation was setting up the necessary systems, departments, correctly placing staff and generally operationalising FEDUSA. A six point strategic plan was

drawn up and implemented and I am satisfied that we are fully operational and offering the type of value and service required by our affiliates.

From an external point of view there are many challenges, too many in fact, and one has to prioritise the issues you want to tackle should you really want to make a difference. It is important for FEDUSA to be relevant today and tomorrow and to adapt with the fast changing times. It is important to take ones members with you and therefore we place a lot of emphasis on training our members on topical issues around economics, labour legislation, globalisation, to name a few, in order that they may understand what is going on and make the necessary contribution.

It is an ongoing challenge to obtain proper mandates from grassroot members. A further challenge is combating the present high rate of unemployment. No grouping can conquer this challenge alone and it is important for all the social partners to take hands and come up with workable solutions together. We were initially not opposed to GEAR but it failed to meet the set employment target and therefore cannot be supported. Should GEAR realise its projected job creation targets, we would probably support it. We are committed to building South Africa, and try to adopt a pragmatic and value adding approach in what we do.

Bulletin: *What is your view of debates taking place around labour law?*

Milant: There is nothing wrong with our labour laws. It is unfortunate that these laws end up being the 'scape goat' for everything and anything that goes wrong. People should read less commentary and opinions on the law and rather familiarise themselves with the actual legislation. The

current labour law is effective and fair, when applied properly.

There is a push from government to exempt small business from the labour law. A blanket exemption would definitely not be supported by FEDUSA. We do however understand that SMMEs are responsible for creating 80% of the employment worldwide and therefore must receive focus from government, especially when our high unemployment rate is considered.

Should one want to consider one or another form of exemption, the employer concerned should engage with the union or employees (where no union is present) in the workplace, information should be shared, agreement should be reached, whereafter the parties should jointly approach the Department of Labour for the required exemption.

We are also pushing for a tightening up of Section 189 of the LRA. Our concerns are that this section allows an unscrupulous employer to merely go through the motions of consulting, thereby avoiding matters of substance. We are also concerned about the lack of a procedure to maintain the status quo in a workplace when a dispute arises during the consultations concerning Section 43 of the previous LRA. We also want adequate disclosure provisions to be included.

Bulletin: *What major campaigns are you running?*

Milani: We believe that the individual tax rate and the tax rate applicable to pension funds are too high and we have been running a campaign on this. Other focus areas have been HIV/AIDS, child labour and equality in the workplace.

Bulletin: *What is your assessment of Nedlac?*

Milani: I think that Phillip Dexter is an

excellent choice as the new executive director to take Nedlac into its next phase of social dialogue and nation building – he has our support. The social partners must guard against bringing a talk shop and petty point scoring mentality to Nedlac. Nedlac has played a very important role in the past and I hope this trend will continue. To be successful, Nedlac will have to sharpen its focus to lead (and not follow) on changing trends and matters of importance.

Bulletin: *What is your message to your members?*

Milani: South Africa is at a very exciting, but also a critical time in its' history. We hold the future of this country in our hands and must work together in building the economy, cross-cultural relationships and 'a proud to be South African' ethos. You get three types of people: those who wish for something to happen, those who make things happen and those who wonder what happened. Let's make sure we fall in the second category.

Bulletin: *What is your message to the employers?*

Milani: Labour relations is about relationships. Instead of hardening attitudes and seeing labour as a nuisance, we would encourage employers to interact with us and build relationships in the workplace – we can add value.

Building friendships will help build a more productive environment that is worker and investor friendly. Don't be scared to encourage this. It is bad business to only engage with labour when there is a crisis. The employers should not forget that they are dealing with people, fellow citizens, and not dispensable factors of production. ★