

Transport merger

FEDUSA unions join forces

Three FEDUSA-affiliated unions have merged to become a force in the transport sector. They are the Employees Union of South Africa (EUSA), the Salaried Staff Association (SALSTAFF) and the Technical Workers' Union (TWU). The new union will have almost 27 000 members giving FEDUSA majority representation in the transport sector.

The three unions operate mostly in Transnet and its business units including Portnet, Petronet, Autonet, South African Airways (SAA) and Spoornet. They also have members working for British Airways, Sun Air and other transport companies.

Rank and file must still decide upon a number of issues, including:

- the name of the new union - a proposed name is the Transport and Allied Workers' Union of South Africa (TAWUSA);
- how branch structures will be integrated;
- the election of regional officials.

Like other FEDUSA unions, the new union will be politically independent and non-partisan. Officials warn government - their main employer - that they will not allow it to undermine human and trade union rights.

The new union will participate in privatisation as long as there is no retrenchment and no downsizing. They will participate in order to influence the

Etienne Vlok reports on the launch of a new union in the transport sector.

process in the interest of their members. The union reminds its employers that it can bring transport to a standstill to enforce its demands.

Why the merger?

André Venter, general secretary of SALSTAFF, says that the merger is in the interest of workers because the three unions will combine their services and energy.

Three unions existed in the past, only because of a paternalistic system that dictated which union workers should belong to. Since freedom of association in 1988, workers have migrated from one union to another. This has resulted in membership of the three unions consisting of similar types of workers. SALSTAFF's membership consists of clerical, salaried technical and operational workers and supervisors.

TWU's focuses on artisans and technicians in the transport industry. Its membership of about 12 000 consists of technical, support and administrative staff in all divisions of Transnet.

Adriaan van Rensburg, assistant general secretary of TWU, identifies the following



pic: SALSTAFF

SALSTAFF general secretary André Venter (second from left).

factors that led to the merger:

- ❑ changes in the LRA encouraging centralised bargaining with bigger unions;
- ❑ the high cost of running three different unions;
- ❑ improved conditions for members by having a strong collective base.

Van Rensburg says that if the unions do not have a strong base, they will be unable to make significant changes in basic conditions. He also feels that there needs to be a balance between FEDUSA and COSATU unions to ensure that the COSATU unions do not benefit the most in negotiations and leave the minority unions with a little to gain.

The structure of the new union

Venter says that the new union will have created an industry committee for each sector (air, rail, sea and road) of the transport industry. The result would be a more professional approach and a stronger union. This structure is necessary as each sector has different rules. Venter does not think that members will get lost in this super-union because members will fall under one of the four industry committees. He admits that members could have been lost in the old unions but

the new structures will prevent this.

Ruben Cloete, vice-president of SALSTAFF, says that the union will now be able to focus more on the needs of members, than in the past when it was a general union. The industry committee of each transport sector will focus on the specifics of that sector. Members will thus get more value for their money with the new structure.

Van Rensburg thinks that the positives of a bigger union outweigh the negatives and that a bigger union enhances capacity. TWU had experienced difficulty in attending all the relevant forums at Transnet because of limited capacity. The new union will have more control over deals struck in the different business units of Transnet because of consolidation that takes place in the merger. Van Rensburg states that the different divisions in the new union, and dynamic leadership, will ensure there is no bureaucratisation.

Van Rensburg admits that it will not be easy to reconcile the needs of white- and blue-collar workers. The new union will differentiate in terms of skill but they will not service one group more than another.

The union will not address members' political needs but rather their economic needs. Van Rensburg says that supply and

demand will always affect what wages gains can be won. The union supports pay-for-performance.

Cloete adds that the unions involved had spent a great deal of time competing against each other, but now they will have more time to focus on their members. Officials in the new union will not nominate leaders but members will nominate and elect shopstewards. This will ensure democratisation and accountability.

Venter believes that white-collar unions must adapt and contribute to transformation. Many managers are inadequately trained and act more like administrators than businesspeople. Venter states that the union must show companies that unions can transform businesses. White-collar unions should be lead by realities not emotions, says Cloete.

Cloete, discussing the union's view of the future of South Africa, says that it is of concern to them as a trade union that there is only a small elite in this country. He says that unions must work to broaden the elite and all people should share, although not equally.

Venter believes that in Transnet there is mistrust between the parties and this has to be removed. There has to be a common realisation of where they are going to ensure that everyone involved buys into the process. Venter says that when unions take co-responsibility with management, retrenchment could be reduced.

Affirmative action

The new union calls for more women and men from previously disadvantaged communities to be employed in the workplace. This will promote equality. The unions urge companies to narrow the wage gap by training workers with the required skills.

The union wants to play an active role in employment equity and its implementation. Venter says that in the workplace historically disadvantaged communities want to move up and white males feel threatened. He suggests that accelerated and focused training should be provided for disadvantaged workers so that they can catch up. He warns that training for those in advantaged communities should continue since this is in the interest of the company and the country. Van Rensburg adds that their white male members understand that changes need to take place. Nevertheless, employers should realise that this highly skilled group also contributes and therefore resources should also go to them.

Discussing their fight against casualisation, Venter says that the union's biggest problem is casualisation in the dock labour pools and at SAA. The unions together with the COSATU affiliate the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) fought against casualisation in the dock labour pools. The union also fought casualisation at SAA by using legal opinion and threats of action. Venter says that this is one way the union plays an active role in fighting casualisation and exploitation by employers.

Other FEDUSA unions

The merger does not include all the FEDUSA unions in the transport sector. The South African Footplate Staff Association (SAFSA) and the Air Line Pilots' Association of South Africa (ALPA-SA) decided not to join the merger.

SAFSA was originally established for train drivers and their assistants. (Train drivers stand on the footplate in the locomotive, hence the union's name.) Most of SAFSA's membership is still in the footplate grade but the union now



PIC SALSTAFF

SALSTAFF vice-president, Ruben Cloete.

represents a variety of workers in Spoornet and Metrorail.

Chris de Vos, general secretary of the union, denies that SAFSA may be in a weaker position in collective bargaining by not merging. He believes that SAFSA will maintain its membership because of the good benefits it offers.

De Vos does not believe the merger would be beneficial to SAFSA's members. He uses the example of the Marion Hill train accident where SAFSA used R500 000 to defend the train driver involved. This would never happen if they were to merge with other unions, since the other unions would not allow them to spend so much money on one member.

Another reason given by De Vos for not joining the merger is the difficulty of organising in Spoornet. Currently SAFSA organises members in their trains while they are between stations. This would be more difficult if the union joined the merger.

De Vos thinks that other unions, especially white-collar unions, do not understand train drivers' needs and special circumstances. In Europe, train drivers are

grouped on their own. Frank Boonzaier, president of SAFSA, agrees that other unions "cannot service our people". De Vos believes that contrary to the LRA, space exists for groups of workers to stand alone. He wants to convince all train drivers, including blacks and women, that SAFSA looks after its members. De Vos says that while they are not ready to merge now, they may think about it in the future, especially if there are going to be retrenchments.

De Vos alleges that SALSTAFF and TWU were forced to merge because of declining membership. He adds that the merger is only taking place to ensure that this new union is *the* union in Transnet – comparable to the SARHWU. SAFSA, on the other hand, is financially healthy and its membership fell only 10% when Transnet's workforce declined by more than 100%.

De Vos explains for SAFSA a merger should be more than just increasing numbers to become bigger than SARHWU. If it were only a numbers game, workers may benefit more by joining SARHWU. (He adds that SARHWU has asked them

whether they would 'want to talk'. "Maybe in the future we will," says De Vos.)

Cloete says that SAFSA was involved in all the workshops on the merger, but later withdrew. He concedes that SAFSA's needs are unique and that the three merging unions are closer to each other. Cloete also says that some union officials felt insecure about the process and were afraid of being axed in the merger. However, the current agreement is that officials will not be retrenched in the merger. Van Rensburg feels that SAFSA will eventually join the new union because companies will put pressure on SAFSA in bargaining and members will put pressure on their leaders when they see other employees getting better benefits.

Venter explains that ALPA-SA is not involved in the merger because the culture among pilots is unique and they have a distinctive bargaining unit.

FEDUSA's policy

De Vos says that FEDUSA does not hold an official position on SAFSA's not joining the merger. FEDUSA has also not approached SAFSA regarding the merger. SAFSA was uncomfortable when the merger was announced because FEDUSA joined the merging unions on the stage without taking SAFSA's position into account.

Chez Milani, FEDUSA general secretary, says that FEDUSA's policy is to encourage and facilitate mergers but the federation will not push for them. He thinks that the bigger the union the better the service. Milani recommends that SAFSA and ALPA-SA join the merger unless they think that they could give their members better service on their own.

Van Rensburg states that the success of other mergers in the FEDUSA ranks made the three merging unions realise that a merger is a viable option. His view is that FEDUSA supports the merger because it

wants to harmonise like-minded unions in specific industries.

Venter states that SALSTAFF chose to affiliate to FEDUSA because it is the federation with which SALSTAFF feels most comfortable, both politically and culturally. SALSTAFF could contribute constructively as a FEDUSA affiliate. In the past, SALSTAFF and FEDUSA were not seen as legitimate players. However, this is changing and they enjoy prominence now like never before. They are now also reaching maturity in their roles.

Van Rensburg says that TWU joined FEDUSA as FEDUSA is not politically aligned. He feels that a union must represent members on economics, not politics. COSATU and FEDUSA face common issues, but politics is not one of them.

Venter says that co-operation with COSATU is good. "Gone are the days when we scored against them." Cloete is part of the labour delegation in the NFA (National Framework Agreement on the Restructuring of state assets) 'six-a-side' team together with COSATU. He says that instead of the 'us and them' rivalry that existed between the federations, there is now a mutual respect. SALSTAFF is working with SARHWU in Transnet and other companies.

Challenge to unions

We are now seeing more and more mergers in COSATU and FEDUSA. As a result there are much bigger general unions which will no doubt be significantly stronger at the bargaining table. The challenge for these new super-unions is to provide an excellent service to each individual member. It is one thing for a union to secure a good wage for a member, but the union must also still be able to address each member's individual grievance should the need arise. ★